

Sci-T press

ENTERPRISE

LOG ENTRIES 92



*a
Star Trek
fanzine*

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A ScoTpress publication

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Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton

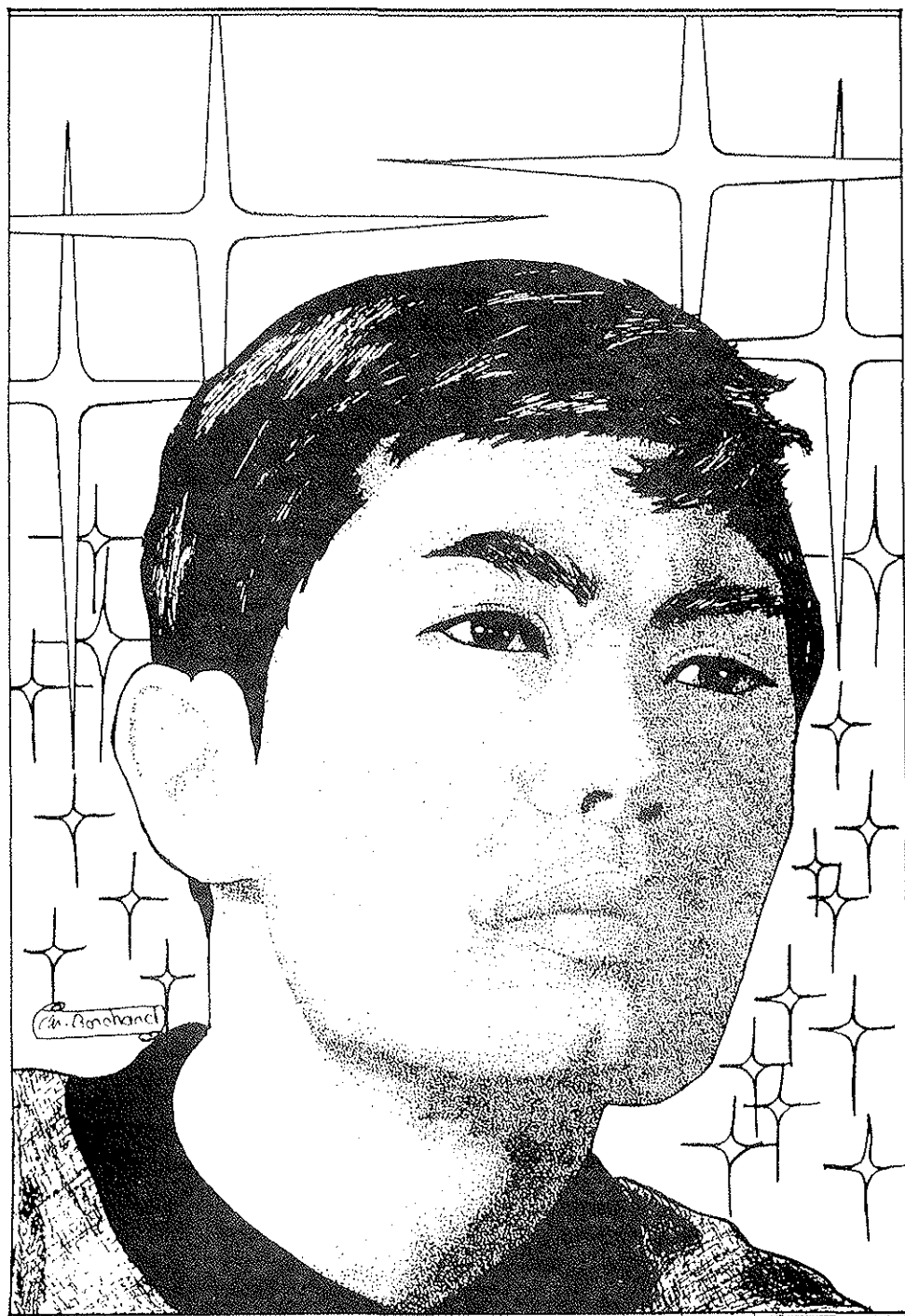
Printing - Urban Print, 57 Perth Road, Dundee

Distracting - Shona and Cindy

ENTERPRISE - LOG ENTRIES 92 is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -
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LOST AND FOUND

by

Alex Blakeney

"James T Kirk, by the authority vested in me by Starfleet Command, I hereby arrest you on charges of High Treason against the peoples of Earth and the United Federation of Planets. All rights, duties and privileges as a Starfleet officer are hereby withdrawn. You are not obliged to say anything but anything you do say will be recorded and may be used at your trial. Do you have anything to say?"

The huddled figure in the chair shook his head wordlessly.

The pitiless young voice went on, "In that case you will be held in the secure accommodation at this base until such time as a ship can be found to take you to Earth where you will stand trial. Take him away."

As the guards came to lift him to his feet, the prisoner raised his head for the first time since entering the room. "Lieutenant, where's my ship?" he said. His voice was husky and he seemed to be having difficulty focusing his eyes.

"You no longer have a ship and I'm sure as hell not going to tell *you* where any of the fleet are, you treacherous bastard." The young man's professional veneer cracked wide open.

The prisoner looked at him gravely and the lieutenant felt an unexpected pang of shame, then the head dropped and the prisoner allowed the guards to hustle him out of the room and down to the cells.

Once there they began to shackle

him. Technically physical restraints were illegal but nobody was taking any chances; his ingenuity was legendary. Nobody spoke to him unless they had to, indeed it seemed as though they could scarcely bear to look at him. Until that is, the very last moment when the humiliating procedure was drawing to an end and one of the men was kneeling before him, checking the locks; suddenly the man looked round quickly, leaned over and whispered in the prisoner's ear, "The Enterprise is safe."

The bowed head came up at that, looked the guard in the eye and recognised a former shipmate. A smile of singular sweetness broke over the pale face and then faded as the prisoner rolled over to face the wall and closed his eyes against the clean, bright, sterile light of the high-security facility.

He stayed in the cell for a week, eating the food they gave him, taking exercise at the ordained times, submitting to medical examination and psychological testing and talking to no-one. He was under constant watch and seemed to those who guarded him to have withdrawn deep within himself; he did not even react to the myriad tiny but stinging indignities inflicted by the Security lieutenant and one or two of the guards who were unable to resist the temptation to let their disgust boil over into harsh words and rough handling.

During his confinement he was not permitted to contact service personnel and wrote only one letter, to his mother, a cheerful message full of hope and reassurance totally at variance with his

situation and his obvious despair.

The medical examination revealed signs of recent, extensive, physical torture, hurriedly but efficiently treated. However in the eyes of every man and woman on this frontier base that was no excuse. His and their duty was to die rather than reveal what he had revealed and, when his appearance on the Romulan civilian newsnets and his abject and servile confession to a host of real and imaginary 'crimes' was picked up by Federation relay stations and broadcast the length and breadth of the Galaxy, a once more than respected name became a byword for cowardice and treachery. There were even calls for the re-introduction of the death penalty for treason.

His crimes were all the more detestable because of the current unstable position along the Neutral Zone. Following the first incursion, which had been halted by the Enterprise, scientists had worked day and night to give the Federation an edge against both the plasma weapon and the cloaking device. They had only been partially successful. There had been enormous improvements in the motion sensors which, together with improved tachyon detection and communications intercept facilities, meant that it was just about possible for highly skilled personnel to track a cloaked ship and lock the sophisticated weapons targeting computers onto it. Indeed it had even proved possible to adapt the communication sensors to execute this function so that major refits were not required. A crash programme of training had then ensured that every Communications and Science Officer in the front line fleet was instructed in the close team-work necessary to use the new equipment.

In addition Federation scientists working from the sensor readings taken

by the Enterprise had also come up with greatly improved shielding for ground-based installations. This had enabled the outposts and the starbases immediately behind them, including 23, to withstand the hit-and-run raids that had followed within a matter of months.

The bad news was that they had not been nearly as successful with ship shielding. Although some improvement could be made, major upgrades were impossible due to the drain on ship's power.

The effectiveness of both these developments depended on absolute secrecy, for once the enemy knew about either they would inevitably improve their own techniques. In the spiralling, tit-for-tat world of military secrets, a few months extra concealment could make the difference between victory and defeat.

Kirk, as a trusted Starship Captain, had access to all this information and more, and a frightened and angry Starfleet Command had found itself forced to conclude that he had sold those secrets in return for passage back to Federation territory. Three weeks after his shameful appearance before the Empire his captors had shipped him over the Neutral Zone to the remote base under a flag of truce.

It was this remoteness which was causing the delay in returning him to Earth. Unless they could put him on one of the big ships the journey would take months, and public opinion was demanding immediate action. Ever mindful of its image, and possibly even more mindful of the forthcoming meeting of the Federation Budgetary Committee, Starfleet decided to dispatch a cruiser.

Which was when they met their first problem. The order was sent to the Hood; however, three hours after

receiving it that ship suffered a sudden and catastrophic warp drive failure. No one was hurt and little serious damage was done but the ship was left with no alternative but to limp into the nearest Starbase for repairs. The second problem was the only available replacement - the Enterprise.

There was consternation at Fleet HQ. The loyalty the traitor inspired in his crew was notorious but, if there was to be a trial before the year's end, there was no other choice and surely no one, no matter how loyal, could wish to help or support a man like that. Even Garth's crew had mutinied in the end when faced with conduct too appalling to be condoned.

In the Briefing Room with the command crew and Doctor McCoy, Spock replayed the orders he had received from Admiral Delgado and sat impassively while they listened to the details of the assignment. Delgado was angry and embarrassed, and it lent his tone an unusual and inappropriate severity.

"You understand, Commander? You are to treat him as you would any other prisoner and return him to Earth at a speed of not less than Warp 5. I want your word of honour as a Vulcan and a Starfleet officer that you will have him taken straight to the Brig."

The Vulcan ignored the stifled cries of protest from the rest of the Bridge crew and listened once more to his own voice saying, "You have it, sir." Shortly after that the Admiral signed off.

Before anyone could speak or protest he turned to the Engineer. "Mr Scott, I would be interested to know how you managed to disable the Hood." Mr Scott had threatened to do ... something unspecified and Spock had misdiagnosed his words as mere hot air; he was

conscious that he did not usually underestimate people that badly.

There was an embarrassed harrumping noise and when Mr Scott finally spoke his accent was more than usually impenetrable. "Ah well, Mr Spock, did ye no ken Maddie Masterson is now Chief Engineer of th' Hood?"

"No, I did not," said Mr Spock in complete comprehension, but he let Mr Scott continue, for he had learnt a lot since the Galileo incident and he knew the others needed to understand too.

"A year an a hauf ago she wis one o' my laddies. I only had tae ask... She served under him an' all."

Spock spared half a second to wonder why Mr Scott referred to someone as abundantly feminine as Engineer Masterson as a "laddie" and then, recognising the thought as a symptom of rising hysteria, thrust it aside and asked, "What is the engine status, Mr Scott?"

"You name it - you got it," was the imprecise but forceful reply.

"In that case, Mr Sulu, set course for Starbase 23, Warp 8 - no doubt, Mr Scott, you will inform us if that proves a problem. ETA?"

"Eighteen hours 42.3 minutes." The Helmsman had started the calculations the second the Admiral had finished speaking.

"Mr Sulu, you have the Con. I shall be in my quarters. Anybody who feels the need to communicate the news to the staff in their Department has my permission to do so." He got up to leave.

"Mr Spock." As he passed her, Uhura, greatly daring, put her hand on

his arm. "You're not really going to turn him over to them, are you?"

"I intend to follow my orders, Lieutenant," he said calmly, "when I receive them." And with that he left the room.

A bewildered Chekov began a half-hearted complaint about Vulcan cold-bloodedness, but Uhura was having none of this. "Pavel," she said gently, "whose orders do you think he was referring to?"

Scott pushed back his chair wearily and levered himself to his feet. "Well, I hope yon Vulcan is more careful wif his tongue in front of the crew. They're in an awfu' funny mood." He caught Doctor McCoy's eye and the two older men exchanged a look of understanding; they had both worked hard over the previous weeks to maintain at least a degree of calm aboard but they both knew that, despite their best endeavours, that calm seemed likely to shatter irretrievably at any moment.

Alone in the heated sanctuary of his quarters, Vulcan fists unclenched and tense shoulders relaxed. At last, an end to waiting. His internal clock continued to keep him accurately informed as to the passing of the days and weeks but the last four months had given him his first insight into the Human perception of time as something malleable and plastic, the speed of whose passing distorted according to the events which filled it. The whole horror of those events, from the Captain's disappearance while on a shore visit to the order from Admiral Delgado, had taken only four months, two weeks and 21.2 hours, and yet Spock felt as though he had lived a lifetime during it.

Only McCoy knew that Spock had

moved heaven and earth to remain in command of the Enterprise and had then been obliged to do the same all over again to retain his rank. It had taken days of delicate negotiations and political manoeuvring, and the ruthless and highly distasteful use of his personal status as a member of one of Vulcan's most prominent families and of his standing as one of the Federation's leading scientists.

Intellectually Spock had found the entire process grindingly difficult and both men had marvelled again at the Captain's ability to ride the convoluted threads of relationships and statuses which made up Starfleet HQ. It was a skill Kirk was oddly ashamed of, probably because it conflicted with his self-image as a bluff, straight-forward military man, and he hardly ever chose to exercise it; but when he did, and it was always for the sake of the ship or its crew, he was masterly. Until recently the word had been that, once you were one of 'Kirk's own', you need never worry about your career again - it had been a status not easily won and all the more prized for it.

McCoy had been first impressed and then deeply worried by Spock's apparently limitless faith that the Captain would return to the Enterprise. When he had tentatively suggested that Kirk might be dead Spock had merely said "No" and then refused to discuss the matter further, leaving McCoy unsure whether the Vulcan was actually giving voice to that most unVulcan of all emotions - hope - or whether he knew something nobody else did.

Even the Romulan broadcasts had not appeared to shake his confidence. Unusually for him he had made a point of appearing in the Mess where comments over dinner about the Captain's "resourcefulness" and "skill at what I believe is called 'the big bluff'," had done

much to calm the situation.

Back at Starbase 23 the news that the prisoner was to be transported to Earth on the Enterprise provoked the first real reaction from him that anyone had seen since his arrival. He was obviously and completely horrified. In fact so total was his distress that the prison authorities sent for a doctor to sedate him, fearing he might do himself some injury. However when the doctor arrived he found the prisoner lying quietly in his usual position with his face to the wall, apparently resigned to whatever came next, although his guards noticed that he did not sleep at all that night.

Next day he was given a shower, a shave and a haircut and issued with clean, new, prison fatigues. Then, still in handcuffs, he was taken under guard to the base transporter room where two guards and the Security lieutenant were waiting to beam up and formally hand him over to the Enterprise.

During the short conversation with the ship one of the guards saw him lift his head, suddenly alert, at the sound of the measured tones coming from the comms panel, but when the time came to take up position for transport, the head fell once more and the expression became unreadable.

"Energise." The familiar tingle enveloped them all as reality faded out and was reborn. "Lieutenant Tarsalimo and prisoner requesting permission to come aboard."

"Permission granted." The response came from Giotto, Chief of Security. The prisoner shuddered almost imperceptibly but he stepped off the platform obediently and stood on one side, waiting patiently.

"I expected to see the C.O. - couldn't bear to be in the same room as him I suppose."

"I couldn't say." Giotto was terse to the point of rudeness "Where do I sign?"

The formalities were soon over and the Security detail left, glad to escape the heated atmosphere they could feel but not decipher. All this time the prisoner stood quietly, only the bunching of the muscles in shoulders and neck and the tightly clenched fists betraying his tension.

"If you will come this way." The gentle words hardly seemed to register until the older man went up to him and touched him lightly on the arm. For a few seconds he didn't move then he took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, lifted his head and, face Vulcan-calm, followed Giotto towards the door.

And then his miracle happened.

As the door swept open he heard the sound of a well-known voice. "Ship's Company, 'shun!" and the muffled thump of boots and there, lined up on either side of the corridor, in full dress uniform, the crew of the Starship Enterprise stood to parade attention. On either side of the door the bosuns' whistles sounded in formal acknowledgement of a Captain's arrival on board.

He swayed slightly and the voice sounded in his ear. "Jist a wee minute, sirr, I'll soon have these damn things off ye." Mr Scott, in the tartan glory of his clan, wielding a pair of bolt cutters, released him from his shackles. An honour guard from Security formed in front of him and Mr Scott put a tactful hand under his elbow, then they set off down the corridor. As each crew member was passed they saluted in the rarely-used, old-fashioned, military manner and each of them murmured their own

greeting. "Good to have you back, sir."
"Welcome home, sir."

As they turned a corner he glanced back and saw the crew racing away and realised that they were running to relieve those on duty so that they too could join the welcome. He pressed a hand to his chest - the pain over his heart was scarcely bearable. One or two of the crew were openly crying as they stood to attention and only by working his way through the crew list, ticking off people in his mind as he passed them, was he able to retain his own self-control.

They entered the Security Section, marched into a cell and then without a break marched straight back out again. A brief smile flickered; he understood perfectly.

He knew his strength was failing fast as they entered the turbolift and swept up to the senior officers' quarters. It was there that he found those who were closest to him - his yeoman, Christine Chapel, Giotto, who had somehow found time to change uniforms, the Bridge crews DePaul, Kyle, Leslie, Riley, Palmer, Chekov, Sulu, Uhura.

He paused for a moment outside the door to his quarters and passed a wondering hand over the name plate he had thought never to see again, then he went in alone. They were here as he had known they would be, not stood to attention as the others had been, just waiting for him. He opened his mouth to speak and they had to run to catch him as he fell.

Vulcan reflexes ensured that Spock won the race. Gently he lifted the limp and frighteningly light body onto the bed and stood, tense but impassive, while McCoy ran a scanner over it. The Doctor had already reviewed the records sent by the prison authorities and so he was not

surprised by the readings. He looked up at the Vulcan and smiled reassuringly.

"Exhaustion and emotional overload - I'm not even gonna take him down to Sickbay. What he needs is quiet and a friend or two to talk to." He saw the narrow shoulders relax and watched with some concern as the Vulcan sat down heavily on the bed. *Poor bastard, easy to forget how hard this has been on him*, he thought and then aloud, "D'y'e want me to take the first watch? There ought to be someone here - if he wakes up alone in his condition he's liable to think we've had second thoughts."

Spock nodded, unable to speak. He had been unutterably shocked by the sight of the white-faced figure who had just come in. He had seen the body relax its upright stance, the mind its strained hold on consciousness and both surrender willingly to the dark. Jim, who never surrendered to anything! He was horrified both at the sight and at its effect on himself. If he was to be of any use at all to his friend he must regain control, re-erect his shields against emotion before he sat down in a corner and wept like a child.

McCoy, stronger in this if in nothing else, patted him on the shoulder. "Off you go then, I'll call you in six hours."

Spock was turning to go when the man on the bed opened his eyes and spoke. "Mom?"

"She sends her love, says to tell you she and Peter never doubted you and they're both looking forward to seeing you soon."

The eyes drifted shut and then forced themselves open. "Moira Mitchell - will you check she's okay, please?"

"We'll see to it - don't worry, just go back to sleep." McCoy was talking gently, in the same voice he had hushed his infant daughter with in the years before his divorce.

"And please will you turn the lights out - I haven't had any darkness..." His voice trailed off as Spock dimmed the light and he slept. They noted silently that everything he had asked of them had been phrased as a request not an order. Although neither man doubted him, they both realised that whatever had happened to him and whatever they felt about it, James Kirk no longer considered himself Captain.

They went to stand over by the door to talk so they would not disturb him. "Doctor, who is Moira Mitchell?"

"Gary Mitchell's mother. She's disabled following an attack of Almatorsi fever. Jim's been supporting her since Gary died."

"Surely he had service insurance?"

"Young bastard hocked it as security for a loan - the money lender called it in when he died. She thinks she's getting a 'Fleet pension'; she doesn't know that if it wasn't for Jim she'd be destitute."

Spock nodded and thought how typical were both the act and the reticence. He now had a good idea what had lured the Captain off the base without telling anybody where he was going, an act that had raised unavoidable suspicion in several very high places. All it would have taken would have been an invitation to a meeting with or about Mrs Mitchell and the Captain would have been anxious to avoid discussing his destination with anybody. Someone, somewhere had made it their business to get to know Jim very well indeed, and he reflected that it took a particularly ugly

ruthlessness to use a man's most decent instincts to lure him to his own destruction.

He glanced towards the bed and left the room. Outside he found Uhura waiting alone, obviously deputised as crew liaison. He explained the position to her, repeating the Doctor's diagnosis, unaware that his reputation for truthfulness made his reassurances more valued than McCoy's.

The news spread rapidly though the ship. Throughout the preceding four months faith in the Captain had remained surprisingly high. Most of the crew had served under Kirk long enough to grow accustomed to the sight of him pulling rabbits from hats and when he had first disappeared they had all hoped for and even expected the best. Very few had been prepared to believe the worst before they had to.

The broadcasts when they came had the effect of dividing the crew into two, perhaps unexpected, groups: those who refused to believe the Captain a traitor; and those who, having seen the condition he was in, believed that he might have talked but who nevertheless could not bring themselves to blame him. Knowing him as they all did, they realised that only unimaginable horrors could have reduced him to the state they could see on their screens, and they were prepared to welcome him back on that basis.

Anyone harbouring darker suspicions kept them to themselves, especially after the lynch mob rhetoric of the media reached the Enterprise. The resultant backlash against 'civilians', 'desk jockeys', 'press vultures' and outsiders in general had generated a fierce, protective loyalty towards 'their' Captain. A loyalty that had welded the crew into a single, focused and rather terrifying unit that was more than ready to forget recent

history and remember instead their service with him. They all owed him their lives, but for many it was the memory of a thousand tiny courtesies and examples of consideration that weighed more heavily upon them and they found themselves basing loyalty on things as small as an arm round a grieving shoulder, a smile of thanks, an apology or a letter of reassurance to an injured crewman's worried parents.

Unaware as yet of the fierce emotions his return had stirred up, Kirk slept the thin, unrestful, dream-ridden sleep that had been his portion since the last time he had occupied the same bed.

He woke early the next morning and lay for a few seconds luxuriating in the dark, peaceful hum of his quarters. Then memory crashed over him like a tidal wave and he rolled over onto his stomach, groaning. Instantly someone was at the side of his bed and without thinking he jerked into a foetal huddle, covering his head with his arms.

"Jim - please!"

Even above the thunderous pounding of his heart the shocked voice of his friend penetrated. He uncurled and looked up into Spock's openly appalled face. He swallowed convulsively. "Sorry - force of habit," he said awkwardly and looked away, unable to bear the sight of the naked emotion he had forced upon the Vulcan.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, and realised that someone had removed the fatigues while he slept and that he was clad only in anonymous, Starfleet-issue underwear of T-shirt and shorts, the kind that was supplied to prisoners and serving crew alike. He wondered vaguely which of them had had the sensitivity to realise that he wouldn't want to contaminate his

quarters with tangible reminders of his imprisonment. He shivered slightly; the memories were not going to be that easy to deal with.

"I'm going to take a shower - you will be here when I come out, won't you?" He was unable to look his friend in the face and so missed the eyes widening in startled comprehension and heard only the reassuring, "Yes".

As soon as the bathroom door closed Spock moved to the intercom and softly alerted the Doctor, who arrived seconds later. Quickly he explained the situation and watched as McCoy reacted explosively.

"Poor devil, still not sure of us." Furious though he was, the Doctor still had the presence of mind to keep to a whisper. He paused in his pacing to look at the Vulcan. "What are you picking up from him?"

Although primarily a touch telepath, prolonged daily proximity and a number of actual mind melds had left the Vulcan with the ability to sense the Captain's general emotional state. He concentrated, choosing his words carefully. "Shame, exhaustion, fear and guilt," he said eventually.

McCoy nodded. "Yeah, that's just about what I expected. Torture's like rape, and that's the classic pathology of the rape victim - doesn't matter what they did, doesn't matter how hard they fought, they still feel like collaborators in their own violation." A sudden horrible thought occurred. "You don't think...?"

Spock didn't pretend not to understand. "Possible but unlikely, given what we know of the Romulans' warrior code." The Vulcan was stone-faced. "I take it your medical records..."

The Doctor's shake of the head cut off the rest of the sentence and the two men settled down to wait for their friend.

In the shower Kirk stood under the pounding water, temperature and pressure turned up as high as the computer would allow. Having done his best not to think about anything important for weeks, he now found that he was incapable of rational thought at all. The words he'd forced himself to memorise all those weeks ago trudged through his brain, an endless, dreary round of names and places and figures interspersed with nauseating memories of his own voice pleading for mercy. Wearily he leant forward and rested his forehead against the tiled wall, hoping to drown out the noises in his head with the drumming of the water and the far-off throbbing of the engines.

He stayed under the water so long that McCoy was starting to fret, and when he eventually came out, naked save for the towel round his waist, a whole new cycle of anxiety started up. It wasn't just the all-too-visible rib-cage or even the extensive scar-tissue, for by now Romulan medicine was known to be strong on returning a man to fighting strength and weak on the cosmetic side of surgery; it was the symbols crudely tattooed into his chest high on the left shoulder that shocked McCoy to the extent that, hardened as he was by years of front-line, military medicine, he had to choke back the vomit. There was something particularly obscene in the sight of the alien script, the flaring orange and black colours and the way the inflamed flesh round the edges glistened in the subdued light. The medical records had spoken of 'scarring to the chest and abdomen'; there had been no mention of this mutilation.

Kirk flushed under the scrutiny and turned away to his clothes locker.

Ignoring the compartments containing uniforms he rummaged around until he found an old pair of corduroy pants and a woollen shirt, kept for the laziest of shore leaves.

Military life, with its shared facilities and communal living, soon kills off personal modesty; however with increasing rank habits of privacy usually tended to re-establish themselves. There was something curiously pathetic about the way he neither asked nor expected to be left alone to dress. Unable to bear the sight of the scars any more McCoy, forgetting all the taboos, took Spock by one surprisingly tense arm and led him to the opposite end of the cabin, and together they stared at the wall.

Behind them they heard the quiet sounds of dressing and then the thud of a dropped shoe and a muffled, "I can't do this." The strain in his voice seemed grossly disproportionate to the difficulty disclosed when they turned to find him sitting on his bed, struggling with the laces of a pair of old shoes.

Gracefully the Vulcan came over, knelt at his feet, and put his hand over the trembling fingers. "You don't have to," he said gently as he dealt deftly with the fastening.

McCoy looked over his shoulder and understood something. There was no easy way to ask this, but he had to know. "Your motor control is damaged, isn't it?"

"Yes." The close-cropped head remained bent, revealing a ring of scars running right round the bone-white neck.

Swiftly McCoy ran his scanner over him. How much else had the Base medic missed? He examined the readings and sighed with relief. "Never mind, the damage isn't irreparable. You come down to Sickbay and I'll have you sorted out in

a couple of hours. We'll deal with that godawful tattoo thing at the same time."

"No!" The voice was low but definite.

"It's only a coupla minor operations..."

"No! No more operations!"

The scanner in McCoy's hand began to read massive increases in blood pressure and adrenalin and, in a sudden flare of horror, he understood. "They didn't give you any anaesthetic, did they?" he whispered.

Kirk shook his head and then forced himself to lift it so he could apologise to his friend face to face. "I'm sorry about the reaction, Bones. I know it'd be different with you but you're not allowed to treat me. My body is part of the evidence for my trial."

The extent and vehemence of the Doctor's cursing brought the first smile they had seen to the tired face, and for a moment they had a glimpse of the vital, living man they had known before. Spock raised an eyebrow and essayed a contribution to lightening the mood. "Really, Doctor, I don't suppose Starfleet Command knows where a Falactrian bandit keeps its hoard and I fail to see how demanding that they insert themselves in it could possibly help."

The pale face looked up at them both and smiled slightly, then the eyes filled with tears. McCoy, who had been waiting for this since Kirk's arrival on board, cheerfully abandoned 40-odd years of conditioning on the acceptability of physical contact between men and, sitting on the bed, hauled his friend into his arms. After a split second's hesitation Spock, who was still sitting on his heels at Kirk's feet, knelt upright and put his arms

round both of them. Sandwiched between his two friends, his face buried in someone's shoulder, James Kirk wept as though his heart would break. Not quietly, as the despairing weep, but with a sort of noisy misery that spoke of raw pain and of a strong mind still struggling to understand what had happened to it.

When he had finished the Doctor produced a real silk handkerchief from up his sleeve and Kirk blew his nose and wiped his eyes. "I can't imagine why women think this such a good idea," he said, real amusement in his voice for the first time, "I feel terrible."

"Well, in my medical opinion, you look a whole lot more like yourself and less like the zombie-walking-death that came aboard yesterday," retorted the Doctor, giddy with relief. "You hungry?"

"Yes," he was surprised. "Hell, that's a first. I haven't felt hungry since they grabbed me." He was talking to the Doctor but his eyes were on the Vulcan, who had dropped back to sit on his heels, his face outwardly impassive except for a pulse beating in the forehead.

"What'll you have?"

"Anything but combat rations." His eyes were still on Spock. "They wouldn't give me anything else on 23, and I've had enough reconstituted protein and high energy biscuit to last a lifetime - if they ever call a war I'm taking sandwiches."

McCoy laughed delightedly and bustled away to the intercom to order a meal.

Kirk leaned forward. "I'm sorry about that, Spock," he said quietly. "How much of it did you take on board?"

"Very little - after the first thirty-five seconds I found it intolerable and was

obliged to choose between shielding my mind against it and moving away."

Kirk eyed him narrowly and then relaxed at the candour of the gaze that met his. "I thought I could feel you mentally standing back. S'okay, I was relieved - I wasn't sure what downloading four and a half months of grief in a few minutes would do to you. It's bad enough for me and I'm used to emotional loads. I don't think I could bear it if I forced you to take it on as well."

Spock looked down quizzically as he got back to his feet, touched by Kirk's familiar, and frequently exasperating, willingness to deal with another's hurts before his own. Remembering the previous night's request he said, "About Mrs Mitchell; as of three weeks ago she was in excellent health, indeed there has been a 4% increase in circulatory efficiency and her doctors believe that it may be possible to operate and give her at least assisted mobility."

Kirk stared at him open-mouthed then threw up his hands. "That's it - I give up! You are without doubt an absolute miracle - how the hell did you find that out all the way out here?"

"I checked your messages. I hope you don't mind. There was one from Mrs Mitchell dated three weeks ago - she gave you her news and assured you of her support."

Kirk smiled his thanks to them both as McCoy came back bearing a tray loaded with the sort of breakfast he didn't usually let anybody eat in peace. They took chairs and watched in satisfaction as he sat down at his desk and tucked in.

Cautiously Spock tried a little morale boosting. "Jim, I strongly recommend that you read your mail; there are many messages of support you

would no doubt find encouraging." He still found humour difficult but he knew that it was based at least in part upon incongruity, so he continued, "I must confess that some of the senders are a little unexpected. They include Mother Horta and, almost more surprisingly, Ambassador Fox."

It must have worked because Kirk swallowed a mouthful of toast and grinned. "I bet that's the first time those two have appeared in the same sentence! Mother Horta?"

"Yes; apparently, thanks to her contact with the miners, she has become greatly addicted to the newsnets and now that her children are doing most of the work she has plenty of time in which to indulge this regrettable weakness. According to the mining manager who sent her message, she states that she does not believe a word of any of it because you are far too - I believe the word she used was endoskeletal."

Kirk laughed, an oddly rusty noise, as though he were unused to it. "Endoskeletal?" he said. "I've been called a lot of things in my time but that's a new one - anyone know what it means?"

"It means she thinks you've got too much backbone to have done what you're accused of," said the Doctor.

Kirk's smile faded. "Pity to spoil the poor creature's illusions," he said lightly, then shoved his plate aside. "Sorry Bones, I can't eat any more." He grabbed and retained the coffee mug as the Doctor whisked the tray away and drank deep, filling his senses with the unaccustomed richness. After months of mere nutrition without taste, the flavour of the coffee seemed to be made up of many different layers and nuances, complex and wonderful. He looked up to see them watching him. "I was just thinking how

much we take for granted. Even the ship's coffee tastes good."

"Captain," began Spock but was interrupted at once.

"Not 'Captain'. They've taken that from me and I've got to get used to it." His voice was light but firm. "Tell everyone to call me Jim. I'd like that; nobody has called me that since I was... taken."

"Jim then." Spock took a deep breath. "I would like to apologise for yesterday's detour by way of the cells, I trust you did not find it too distressing."

"No, I wasn't upset. Made you promise to glasshouse me, did they?"

"Indeed. I was quite prepared to... override that promise; however Mr Scott and Doctor McCoy insisted that you would 'appreciate the joke'."

Kirk smiled, savouring the complex web of loyalties involved. Spock had been prepared to break his word but neither McCoy nor Scotty had been prepared to let him, and both of them had trusted their former Captain enough to know that he wouldn't want it to happen either. "They were right - besides, after that welcome how could I possibly object to anything. Did you organise it?"

Unable to keep quiet any longer, McCoy intervened. "Nobody organised it, it just sorta grew in the last few hours before we got to 23. Started with Security givin' their boots an extra shine and snowballed from there."

"So how come they sent the Enterprise to get me? I was expecting just about any other ship." He watched in some amusement as McCoy and Spock shared a look of uneasy complicity.

Spock looked at the wall over Kirk's head and began, "The original intention was to send the Hood; however that ship had... problems, so the Enterprise was given the order instead."

"What sort of problems?"

"Engineering problems."

"Ah." He too remembered Engineer Masterson and decided against further enquiries. He yawned hugely. "Sorry, I've only just got up and I'm ready for bed again."

"Wanna rest?"

"No, not yet - let's talk." McCoy opened his mouth to speak but was cut off. "No, not about that, I can't - not yet anyway. Tell me about the ship."

Spock had been wondering how long it would take him to ask about the ship. The question of command was going to be difficult. Jim had never before had to deal with its permanent loss and his reaction, judging by the business at Gamma Hydra IV, might be violent; still, there was no point in trying to hide the true position. "I am in command of the Enterprise at this time," he said and watched in some surprise as Kirk blew out his breath in a vast gust of relief.

"Thank heaven for that! What with the welcome committee and you still having only two stripes up, I had visions of some poor Captain, bound and gagged and stuffed in a store-room somewhere. Why haven't they promoted you?" His pleasure and interest were both obvious and sincere.

"As you know I have no wish to command; however Starfleet appear to be labouring under the misconception that I can be persuaded to take up such a position," Spock said blandly.

Kirk eyed him, unfooled. "Played Halberson off against Fitzpatrick, did you?"

McCoy was incredulous. "How the hell did you know that?"

Kirk shrugged. "It was the logical thing to do," he said with a certain dawning mischief in his voice. "Halberson wants the ship for that nephew of his and Fitzpatrick wants anything except what Halberson wants - they both have the power to make the decision or to stop someone else making it. Spock would be the ideal interim candidate for both of them while they rally their power-bases."

Spock had the unaccustomed sensation of being out-thought; it had taken him three days of delicate manoeuvring and inquiries to come to the same conclusion.

Kirk leaned forward, gathering their attention into one narrow focus. "Spock, I want you to keep the ship. Accept the promotion and captain her. You can do it, however little you think you can, and you are the only person I can entrust her to."

Spock looked at him, his heart sinking. Kirk had obviously lost all hope. Hope was often illogical but for this Human it was essential, and it was gone. Only in that extremity would Kirk be prepared to hand over the ship that was more to him than his own life.

He thought of his own plans. He had no desire to continue in the service if Jim were forced to leave it. Having once known the balance and ease of such a relationship he knew he was unwilling to serve without it. He had been alone before and he did not relish a further experience of it, especially not aboard the Enterprise, and especially as he knew that McCoy, that most loyal of men, had also

decided to quit the service if Jim were convicted.

He had acknowledged the unVulcan illogic of the reaction weeks ago but found himself both unable to suppress it and unwilling even to try. This double self-betrayal had occupied his meditation period for several days before he had been obliged to set it aside as a paradox, an equation without resolution. It was his duty to stay and yet he would go.

He had resolved to resign his commission and take up residence and whatever research work was available near whatever prison or rehab. colony Starfleet consigned his Th'yla to. He could and would offer such comfort and support as the law and his friend's stubborn pride would allow, but he knew that he was utterly unable to remain aboard the Enterprise alone.

He looked into the earnest face opposite and found himself incapable of giving the assurance that was demanded of him, but equally unable to refuse. "We will speak of this another time," he said and hurriedly continued, leaving no time for interruption. "As for the ship's status - we are currently skirting the Neutral Zone on course for Earth at warp 5. ETA 3 weeks 4 days 11.3 hours. The ship is in excellent condition and all personnel are functioning to within 94% of maximum efficiency ratings."

Kirk opened his mouth to argue and then thought better of it. Who was he to insist? The time when he could issue orders was gone. He cast around for another topic of conversation.

"Look, I noticed yesterday you have the same crew complement we had before I disappeared. We were due a crew rotation two months back - what happened?"

Spock was conscious of an odd sensation, part regret and part relief. If Kirk had been able to notice that in the condition he had been in yesterday then the habit of command was by no means broken; somewhere deep inside the old responsibilities still tugged at him. No doubt this residue of captaincy would make relinquishing command harder but at least it meant that there were enough of the basic building blocks of his character left for him to rebuild himself and his life.

He thought back to the mass refusal to leave the ship until its Captain's fate was known and phrased his answer carefully. "No rotation was necessary. 17 people re-enlisted, 12 refused promotion and/or re-posting, 28 people refused to take accumulated home leave and 2 cases of Fasothla swamp disease were accidentally recorded in the Medical Log as influenza, thereby avoiding the compulsory shore convalescence laid down for that illness. There were therefore no crew vacancies to be filled."

Kirk's eyes were shining. This was like all his birthdays come at once - so much trust, so much love. "What about the 4 from the lower decks who were due to take late entry to the Academy last month?" he said sternly.

"Ah yes, most unfortunate. It appears that the entire pre-Academy training group contracted chicken pox and had to be quarantined. Their entry has therefore been postponed until next year."

Kirk flung his head back and gave voice to the laugh that had been building, "Chicken pox! What the devil is chicken pox?" he yelled in delight.

"It is of course more Doctor McCoy's province than mine, but I understand that it is an ancient Terran

disease hitherto believed extinct." Kirk laughed again and half way through the laugh became a yawn. "Jim, perhaps you should consider resting further."

"Okay, Spock, I'll just have another shower and then I'll have a nap." He caught sight of McCoy's expression and wagged a finger at him. "And you can take that psycho-analytical expression off your face, Bones! Being clean is another thing I've taken for granted, that's all."

McCoy was unconvinced. "Will you be okay on your own?"

"Oh yes." His voice was firm but the eyes had a strange look in them. "In fact I think that was one of the worst things. Nobody ever left me alone." He shook himself and laid a hand on both their shoulders, urging them towards the door, "Now off you go - I'll see you when you come off watch."

They let themselves be persuaded. McCoy however had the morale of the rest of the ship to worry about. "Jim, are you up to seeing some of the others tonight? They're all real worried about you..."

"Yeah, sure. I'd like that, but not too many and... tell them no Captain-stuff."

They left him and outside turned to look at one another. McCoy spoke first; he was never sure how accurate the Vulcan's diagnoses of emotion were and he was anxious that there be no misunderstanding. "He appears to be coping with it but he's still hurting."

"That is to be expected, under the circumstances." Spock understood only too well. The thirty-five seconds of mental contact he had endured had almost overwhelmed him. He had picked up virtually nothing of the ordeal itself, probably because, even in his extremity,

Kirk had sought to protect the telepath he called Thy'la. It would have been both cruel and unseemly to probe further; however the torrential flood of shame and self-loathing had been unmistakable. Normally the insights gained in the meld were sacrosanct, but he was conscious of his own lack of experience in the healing of emotions and decided to confide in Jim's other nearest friend.

He looked down the corridor, checking for the presence of other ears than McCoy's. "The Captain," out here he had no intention of calling him by any other name, "is a man of conscience." He put his hand up to halt the Doctor's explosive interruption. "He is also a man for whom it is imperative to act in accordance with that conscience. At this time he feels as though he has failed us, the ship, the crew, the service, the Federation and himself. The memory of his tribulation burdens him little in comparison with that."

McCoy blinked, startled at his perception. Spock was right, Jim was a man who constantly felt the need to question his own actions and motives. The belief that he had behaved wrongly in a matter that so nearly touched his personal honour would be intolerable to him - quite apart from the question of any military secrets. He nodded and the two men separated, each lost in his own thoughts.

Dinner that night was an unexpectedly jovial affair. Kirk was determined to keep the occasion light and the others, Scott, Uhura, Chekov and Sulu took their cue from him. He had dealt with the matter of names the moment they arrived by the simple expedient of kissing Uhura on the cheek and calling her by her first name. However nobody felt able to reciprocate except Mr Scott,

who had known him as a cocky young ensign, and at the time had even outranked him.

So it was Scott who raised the question that was uppermost in all their minds. After a long leisurely meal in which the talk had all been about old times and as they sat over the brandy decanter, he took his courage in both hands and asked, "Have ye decided whit ye want tae do, Jim?"

Kirk's head was spinning slightly as a result of the brandy after so long an abstinence, but he didn't pretend not to understand. "I'm going back to Earth to stand trial." He waited until the protests died down. "I know you want to arrange an escape for me but if I'd wanted to do that I would have run from 23 - wouldn't have been that difficult to jump a ship and I could have done it without involving anyone else."

He looked at them, his face serene but still hopelessly wearied. "I'm going back to see my family and to take what's coming to me. I'm not as bad as I painted myself in that broadcast but I deserve at least some what I'm going to get, so don't waste too much pity on me." He grinned and passed his hand over his bristling scalp. "I don't suppose they can do anything to me much worse than this haircut - practically counts as cruel and unusual punishment on its own."

An appalled silence formed and he hurried to fill it. "By the way, I've got a bone to pick with you, Scotty. How could you persuade Madeleine Masterson to risk her career like that?"

Scotty, like the old-fashioned officer and gentleman that he was, accepted the decision and responded to it. "Sirr!" His indignation was a beautifully-judged parody of one of his famous tirades in defence of his 'bairns'. "Are ye insinuatinn"

that a laddie I trained couldnae disable a ship wi'out being caught?"

Kirk shook his head and hastened to deny it. "Heavens no! I wouldn't dare! And I suppose now I'm aboard Maddie will suddenly find a way to make repairs."

"I wouldnae be a bit surprised."

"Tell me, what if it hadn't been the Hood?" He was genuinely curious.

Scott smiled affectionately. Did Kirk really not know how much loyalty he had built up over the years? He leaned forward and patted Kirk on the arm. "Jim, between us in this room - you, me and Nyota here - we've got laddies on every ship i' the quadrant. There was no way they were goin' tae avoid sendin' th'Enterprise." He grinned evilly, "Mind you, y'know Tom Styles is on the Lexington now? Well I always thought his plan tae programme th' food replicators tae add a huge dose of laxative t'everything was a wee bit on the crude side."

They all laughed and the moment passed. Kirk was never quite sure how true that last bit had been.

The meal drew to a close after that: his fatigue was obvious and nobody wanted to tax his strength.

Uhura was the last to leave; as she passed him in the doorway she put her arms round him briefly and was shocked to feel the fine tremors that running through his body. This was more of a strain than he was letting on.

A wave of almost intolerable compassion swept over her and she nearly offered to stay. If anybody needed someone to hold him through the night, it was James Kirk. There had been a physical attraction between them for

years which neither of them had ever had any intention of pursuing, not only because service regs disapproved but also because they were both anxious not to ruin a first class professional relationship. However at this moment she could see his need and it over-rode her scruples. She opened her mouth, hesitated and then closed it again. She couldn't. It was too like admitting that he would never be Captain again, too much like giving up hope. She hugged him hard and left.

Back in her own cabin she reflected on what she had seen. She did not believe the half-confession he had just made for an instant, recognising in it the familiar sound of the Captain taking up responsibility for things that were not his fault. She must remember to have a word with Chekov; he was scarcely more than a boy, she'd better make sure he hadn't got the wrong idea.

During the next few days the crew got used to seeing Kirk padding round the ship in casual clothes and a pair of loafers that Spock had somehow persuaded the fabricators to disgorge. To the crew he appeared cheerful and grateful and resigned. The clothes, the crew-cut hair and the fact that he was a good twenty pounds underweight made him look ridiculously young, like somebody's kid brother, but even so hardly anybody could bring themselves to call him by his first name. Indeed very few of the crew could bring themselves to talk to him at all, daunted by both the scars they could see and the knowledge that there must be more, both physical and mental, that they could not.

However he was in no danger of mistaking this for rejection because, time and again, in corridors and lifts and Mess queues, he found himself meeting crewmen and women unable to express

their feelings except through gentle hands which patted his shoulder or squeezed his arm or grasped his hand.

He never went to the Bridge, preferring to spend his time wandering round the areas of the ship a Captain never gets much time to see. He even spent an entire day up a Jeffries tube with Mr Scott, renewing the magnetic interphase coils for the number two impulse engine. Nobody doubted that he was saying goodbye to his ship.

McCoy and Spock waited to be confided in but it never happened and eventually, driven by increasing concern, the Doctor - with a somewhat reluctant Spock in tow - went in search of him. They found him in his quarters, rubbing his head with a towel after yet another shower.

McCoy glared at him, angry, embarrassed and afraid. He knew damn fine that whatever he was about to hear, he wouldn't like it. He also knew that it needed to be said so he charged in headlong.

"Jim, you have to talk to us," he said crossly, "I don't know what you've done and I don't much care but you have to talk to somebody about it. I got the computer to monitor the water use in here and it's four times higher than anybody else's on the ship. Whatever it is you're washin' off, I want to know about it and I want to know now!"

Spock winced internally at this tone but Kirk seemed unoffended. He merely turned away and tossed the towel into the disposal chute. "I was wondering how long it would take you to come and badger me," he said calmly. "I don't suppose it will do any good to say I'd rather not talk about it?"

"No."

"Thought not. Et tu, Spock?"

"If you would rather not talk in my presence I would be happy to leave you alone with the Doctor."

"Hell no - that's not what I meant and you know it. For someone who claims to know nothing about emotions, you're getting entirely too good at knowing which of my buttons to press. If I do talk about it, it'll be to the both of you. I'm just not sure I want to talk to anyone."

McCoy pulled up a chair and settled down for a good argument. "Look - what's the standard procedure following a mission with casualties?" There was no answer so he plunged on, "You debrief the people involved, find out what went wrong, try to stop it happening again and try to stop them feeling responsible for things they couldn't help - that's all I want to do now."

Kirk was not about to give in that easily. "The two situations are hardly analogous," he said stiffly.

"Why not? You sure look like one of the walking wounded to me and you're bleeding guilt all over the ship."

Spock felt it was time to intervene. "Might I offer an alternative view point? We are currently skirting the Neutral Zone, Romulan incursions along the border have been increasing over recent months and only the Federation's enhanced shielding has protected ground-based operations since then. Although I estimate the chances of you actually being a traitor to be 3,579 to 1 against the fact remains that you must have told the Romulans *something* and it would greatly assist me in my capacity as commander of this vessel if I knew precisely what."

"3,579 to 1, eh?" Kirk couldn't help

but be amused. "Pretty good odds." He looked at them with an expression that was half-affectionate, half-angry. "You two are getting Machiavellian in your old ages. What is this, a variation on good cop/bad cop? Bones appeals to my emotions and you appeal to my command instincts?" He dropped into a chair. "I don't know if I like being that predictable. I'm sure as hell not that easy to manipulate."

McCoy could practically see the need to talk written all over the stubborn face on the other side of the desk. "Okay," he said brutally, "it's straight emotional blackmail time. Tell us because we're your friends and we're asking you to."

"Oh for..."

An explosion of the rare but cataclysmic Kirk temper seemed likely and Spock hurried to join in the Doctor's request. "Please, Jim," he said simply and took up a chair opposite his friend. His years with Humans had taught him all about their simple need to say out loud the things that weighed upon them.

Kirk found his objections melting. It was a simple request that said in effect, 'Come and be helped.' His shoulders relaxed and he sighed. "Looks like I am that easy to manipulate after all," he said eventually.

He ordered two mugs of coffee and one of the pungent Vulcan brew that Spock favoured from the replicator, settled back in his chair and, after a few seconds tense silence began to talk, his voice unconvincingly casual.

"Okay, let's start at Starbase 18. I went ashore to see the Portmaster about those two men - Watson and Ramirez wasn't it? - who'd got into a brawl shore-side. As I was leaving I got a message that Doctor Matheus was on the base and

would like to see me. I'd been in communication with him for years about Mrs Mitchell and the message said he had good news. I didn't think twice about it, there was some sort of medic's conference going on and 18 is half a galaxy away from any danger, usually so safe it's dull. I went to the hotel room I'd been told and got jumped. I came to on a Romulan ship, the Tar'shevek."

He paused. This was even more difficult than he had expected. Intellectually he knew all about the psychology of trauma; he'd been carefully trained to help anyone under his command who found themselves in this sort of situation, but knowing he *should* talk was a long way from feeling *able* to. The truth was he didn't want to remember; he didn't want to have to put into words the things that had happened to him; and most of all, despite everything they had said and done, he did not want to have to lay his dishonour bare before his friends. The very thought of it produced a wave of nausea and a horrible griping sensation in the pit of his stomach.

On the other side of the table they watched him, their eyes bright with concern. He tried to speak and couldn't. He looked down, and when he looked up again, his face was white and strained. "I'm not sure I can do this," he said slowly. "I know it's stupid but you two have such a ridiculously high opinion of me..."

McCoy leaned over the desk, his exasperation only partly feigned. "Listen to me, Jim-boy. Me n'Spock don't care if you told the Romulans everything from the combination of Komack's safe to the President's inside leg measurement. We've both spent four and half of the worst months of our lives worrying about you - now you're back we don't give a plugged nickel about anything else. You

should tell us because it'll help you. It won't make a blind bit of difference to us."

Kirk glanced at the Vulcan. "Colloquially expressed," he began and the other two joined in the chorus, "but essentially correct."

Kirk smiled; it was good to be home, even if it wouldn't be for long. He got himself another mug of coffee, wrapped his hands round the warmth and started again.

"Okay, okay, I'm convinced." He took a deep breath and deliberately unfocused his eyes; he couldn't do this if he had to watch their reactions.

"We all know the Regs. 'Regulation 143.3.2 - It is the duty of every captured officer to escape if possible' - well it wasn't. They weren't the military; every military organisation I've ever met has a moral code of some kind, even if it appears alien to us. This was the Tal'Shiar, Imperial Intelligence, and they had no concept of the civilised treatment of prisoners. They didn't want me to escape so they broke my legs with a grab-handle." His voice was dispassionate; if he told the story as though it were someone else's perhaps he could get through it. The open indignation of the Doctor and Spock's gradually increasing rigidity of body went unseen.

He took another deep breath and started quoting again. "*Regulation 143.3.3 In the event that escape is impossible it shall be the duty of every officer in possession, either physically or mentally, of classified material to ensure that such material does not fall into the hands of the enemy.*" They call that the suicide clause though it doesn't say that in so many words. I could have killed myself during the journey. They never, ever left me alone but I could have used that technique I made you tell me about,

Spock, the breathing thing."

Spock suppressed his reactions. That thought had been almost the worst thing about the whole ordeal, not knowing whether to be glad that he had taught his friend the Vulcan technique for painless euthanasia and had thereby given him a way to avoid the worst or whether to be sorry that it was he who had shown Jim how to die.

"I couldn't do it. I don't think it was fear of dying because I already considered myself dead. They'd question me, probably under torture and then kill me - I knew that and I was ready for it. I just couldn't kill myself, it was too like..." the scarred fingers flexed as though grasping for the right words, "giving up before I had to. I wish I thought it was courage - I've a nasty feeling it was more like vanity. Maybe I've built my self image up to the extent that I'd rather betray the Federation than compromise it. I am Kirk - and if I quit, I'll never hear the end of it," he said wryly, quoting practically the only two respectable lines of a scurrilous lampoon which had circulated through the ship to great applause a few months before his disappearance. He shook his head and shrugged. "Maybe it was fear - I don't know any more."

"I think I was on the ship for about three weeks, I couldn't move. I was dependant on them for everything." A nauseated expression appeared briefly and was gone. "I don't know where we ended up because we transported down at night. All I saw was a big courtyard and a huge white building shaped a bit like the Tented Hall on Vulcan, only larger and more flamboyant. I was expecting something out of Edgar Allan Poe - you know, Bones - old and dark and creepy. This was more like a hospital - light, clean, efficient."

It was getting really difficult to talk

now. "The first few weeks were taken up with the standard sort of thing. Subharmonics, subliminals, hypnosis, auto-suggestion, sleep conditioning, DPR, sensory deprivation, drugs. To my surprise the command conditioning worked - it was all pretty horrible but none of it was unbearable."

He paused but forced himself to continue. "Then there was a nasty attempt at a forced mind meld, a weaselly little bastard with a flat head and eyes like a dead fish. You'd told me how to deal with that one, Spock. I gathered all the hate and the anger that had been building in me since they'd grabbed me and rammed it down the link he built up after they'd tied me down." He grinned wolfishly. "I don't know what it did to him but they carried him out bleeding from the nose and ears and I never saw him again."

Despite himself he caught sight of McCoy's shocked expression and became suddenly angry. "Sorry, Bones - I'm afraid 'Good Ol' Jim' is on vacation right now. Maybe next week I'll start feeling sorry for my enemies again but for the time being you'll just have to put up with 'Jim the Sonovabitch', the one who thinks the only good Romulan is a dead one."

The anger drained away and he rubbed his eyes wearily and looked at them both. "Do you really want to know all this?" He didn't wait for an answer. He just started talking again and soon the words were pouring out in a desperate, cathartic stream.

"There was a gap of about 60 hours. I think they were waiting for some brass hat to come and decide what to do next. Then two new people turned up. They looked like middle-ranking bureaucrats, a man and a woman, both about the same age as me. They looked pretty harmless but I could see everybody was shit scared of them and I soon found out why.

"They were the Imperial Examiner-General and her assistant sent specially from the Praetor's Household, and they got down to the good ol' fashioned, down home, physical torture. Near-drowning, electric shocks, beatings, cold, heat, sleep deprivation, low intensity disruptors, white noise, hanging - I've no idea how long it went on for, it seemed to be eternal. The command conditioning crumbled. After a while I would have killed myself if I could but by then I lacked the physical co-ordination or the mental control to do it. I hung on as long as I could and then I talked." He paused and looked down at his hands; they were shaking visibly. He stared at them for a long time until the shaking subsided. He seemed to have run out of the strength to go on.

"What did you tell them?" asked Spock gently.

Kirk sighed. "Garbage - a useless mishmash of stuff they must know already, stuff it doesn't matter if they know, stuff that was out of date the second I was listed AWOL and outright lies. I knew what they wanted and every moment of coherent thought I had I rehearsed my answers. I invented them and I learnt them - like an actor learning lines, like poetry learned by rote. I thought of nothing else, literally nothing else, *ever*, from the first day they grabbed me to the day I spilt my lying guts all over the floor. Not the pain, not the ship, not my family, not home, not you, not even my own life, just the lies. I repeated them over and over and over again. Sometimes starting in the middle or near the end, sometimes in a different order, now backwards, now forwards. Every moment of my waking life, every conscious second, even when they were beating me, even during this." He pointed at his shoulder.

He caught their eyes and they could

see the soul-deep anger in his. "Want to hear some?" He began to recite in a wooden monotone and after a few seconds Spock recognised a description of the early tests of a force field with shipwide shielding potential which had been the talk of Federation weapons experts a few months earlier. Later tests had proved that the technology did not and could not work; indeed Spock himself had been part of the group that had found the scientific theory that lay behind that failure. He had discussed the project with Kirk over the chess board and Jim had evidently used those discussions as the basis for an elaborate and elegant fraud which, if pursued by the enemy, would entail them in months of fruitless and highly expensive research.

The recitation continued for a few minutes, the voice getting gradually louder and louder, and then it was cut off suddenly. Kirk shook himself angrily. "I can't forget it even now. It still rattles around in here," he struck his forehead with a clenched fist, "like an advertising jingle or a song you can't get out of your head - only there's hours and hours of it, fake ship movements, fake command structures, fake codes, fake weapons..."

There was silence while they watched him drag himself back under control and when he began to talk again his voice was tight and clipped. "They taught us that concentration will help you resist pain. The lies probably did help me hang on but it was only a postponement of the inevitable - sooner or later you talk."

McCoy leaned over. "Why are you so angry with yourself?" he asked, perplexed. "You beat them! You told them nothing and you didn't break!"

Kirk looked at him coldly. "Oh, I broke, don't ever doubt that," he said bitterly. "I broke, I had no choice. These

people are experts. Eventually, despite everything I did and everything I was, they split me open like a rotten log and I emptied out the lies I'd concocted because, by that time they were so much a part of me telling the lies was easier than telling the truth. Without those lies I would have told them everything I knew."

He seemed to be looking inwards at something only he could see, the trembling in the hands started again and to the fascinated horror of his friends he began to rock gently backwards and forwards, hugging himself.

"I thought they'd kill me then. I was desperate for it and horrified when they didn't. I blacked out, I think for a couple of days, and when I came to they were rebuilding my face and hands, repairing the visible damage. The governor of the prison came and said I had to make a recording for the newsnets. I tried to think but I didn't seem to have a mind left to do it with - I still thought they were going to kill me and this seemed to be the only chance I'd get of letting you two and my mother know what had happened to me. They say not knowing is the worst. Trouble was - there was a good chance that the Tal'Shiar would rather keep it all quiet while they exploited the information I'd given them."

He began to shiver and Spock rose, went to the locker and gave him a woollen sweater. He tried to put it on but the trembling was so bad that eventually they had to help him with it.

When he started to speak again his voice was so low they could hardly hear it. "I knew I had to put on a good show - make it so 'entertaining' that they wouldn't be able to resist showing it - so I gave them... what you saw. I tried to make some of it sound inherently implausible but I was too far gone by

then for much fine tuning. I knew you two and Mom wouldn't believe it and you were the only people I cared about by then, everything else had been killed by the pain."

"Why do you think they let you go?" McCoy didn't care but he wanted everything to come out.

Kirk shot an odd look at Spock and seemed to hesitate, "I don't really know - I don't think there was a reason. Partly because they thought they'd got everything I had to tell them; partly because I was a loathsome specimen by that stage, beneath anyone's dignity to kill; and partly because, although the leadership caste are merely exploiting the Warrior Ethic, it still plays well with the public and sending me back was a chance for a big gesture. You know - The Empire will not soil its hands with the oathbreaker - we return him to you for his punishment." He covered his eyes with his hand for a moment and took a shuddering breath. "It may also have been because I begged them not to."

"Why?" Spock was blessedly uncritical.

"Briar patch principle - I'd got to know how their minds work by then." He smiled mirthlessly. "Nothing like a couple of days with someone who's breaking your metacarpals one by one for giving you cultural insight. I was forsworn in their eyes, the lowest of the low, and whatever I didn't want was probably exactly what I ought to get. I think that's why they fixed me up before they sent me back. So what I'd done wouldn't be obscured by the condition I was in."

He shrugged. "I didn't really think it would work but after all the rest I didn't feel as though I could give up without the effort so I grovelled and pleaded not to be sent back. I even..." He broke off,

breathing deeply through the nose. "No." There were some things no one should burden his friends with.

"They started to fix me up. I thought they were just getting me ready for another round of questioning. I forced myself to memorise another set of lies for them. I had visions of an endless series of questions and operations and more questions. I could feel myself going mad. I even tried to make it happen. Then one day they gave me a shot of something and I woke up on 23. I'd lost all contact with reality by then, I wasn't sure whether it was real or a Romulan fiction or a hallucination; by that stage my dreams were often more vivid and certainly a lot less painful than being awake. It wasn't 'til I saw one of the guards was Jon-Jo Hasek who'd been with me on the Republic that I realised I was back.

"I could see they all hated me. I don't blame them - stuck out there on the edge of the Neutral Zone, front line troops presented with a man who had sold them out for the sake of his own miserable skin. Most of them were only kids and at that age you always think you'd be ready to 'do or die'. Hell, even the Doctor could scarcely bring himself to touch me."

McCoy made a furious mental note to contact the Federation Bureau of Medical Ethics; there was no excuse for negligence on this scale.

"I didn't think like that back there, of course. I'd stopped thinking at all, I was just... lost. Both sets of lies began to tangle and for some reason it seemed desperately important to try to sort them out and keep them separate. When they said the Enterprise was coming to get me I broke down completely - I'd become convinced that you'd despise me too." He put up a hand to stifle the protests. "Why

shouldn't you? I despised myself. It wasn't until I came aboard I realised," he shied away from putting the great gift he had received into his own words and took refuge in quotation, "that I was not to be... 'cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.'"

Finished at last, he put his elbows on the desk and hid his face in his hands, not in shame but in simple exhaustion. Something inside Spock's chest seemed to twist at the sight. The ordeal he had just heard described filled him with a pity and an anger he could not even begin to control and which he only just managed to prevent appearing in his face. However while he could understand Jim's anger only too well, he was baffled by the overwhelming sense of failure he could almost see radiating in waves from the slumped figure on the other side of the desk. Haltingly he did his best to put the question into words.

"Why do you blame yourself?" he asked quietly. "The kidnap was not of your making, you told the Romulans nothing and you returned. I do not see that you have done anything with which to reproach yourself."

Kirk sat upright, responding almost automatically to the request for information. "It was only luck, Spock. If they'd been a little better at their filthy trade I'd have been unable to stop them finding out anything they wanted to know. I should have killed myself in the beginning - then there'd have been no chance of me betraying anything."

"Jim!" It was McCoy's turn now. "Stop beating yourself up for not giving in before you had to. That's what you are and it's saved all our lives more times than I can count. And as for it being luck that kept you from talking - you've always made your own luck and a dam'

good job you've made of it too."

The Vulcan took up the argument. "You have always demanded too much of yourself; you are only..."

There was a sudden flare of anger. "Human? Believe me, Spock, I was only too well aware that any Vulcan could have done better than I did."

Spock was undeterred. "I was going to say 'mortal', and as for the rest you are incorrect. A Vulcan would have caused his own death as soon as it became apparent that there could be no hope of rescue. It would be illogical to suffer pain in those circumstances." He paused and then said, "Although I regret your pain I cannot regret the return you purchased with it; nor do I believe that you yourself would wish to die at the hands of your enemies if there was any method by which you could avoid it."

Kirk swallowed and shook his head, ducking it to hide his face. McCoy debated whether he had had enough but decided to let things take their course. Better get it all out while he was in the mood to talk. It probably wouldn't last. "So why the hell are we all acting like we're on our way to a neck-tie party? You tell Starfleet you ran rings round the Roms, they say, 'Well done, Kirk, have another medal' - end of story!"

Kirk looked at his friend wearily; so passionate; so certain; so naive. "It doesn't work like that, Bones, you ought to know that by now. Why should they believe me? And even if they do and I get acquitted at the court-martial, the acquittal won't be one tenth as good a story as the sight of me on prime-time Tri-V betraying everything I'm supposed to hold dear. The first was a 'Galactic Incident', the second will be a closing half-minute on the late night news. Wherever I go I'll find someone who

knows the first half of the story and doesn't know the rest. Can you really see Starfleet sending me anywhere on that basis?"

He could see his two friends eyeing him with dismay; this accurate, cynical hopelessness was so uncharacteristic neither man knew how to deal with it. He stretched out a hand to them. "Hey, don't look like that! After the hell I've been in this trip - knowing everybody aboard still accepts me, it's more than I ever dared hope for. It's more than enough. Until four and a half months ago I had the best life in the known Universe. I can hardly complain about the price now."

McCoy was not convinced. He knew his friend better than he knew himself. At the moment he believed what he was saying; after what he had been through he was entitled to a little resignation, a little exhaustion, but it wouldn't last. In a few weeks or months or maybe even years the longing would come back. The stars, the unknown, a ship to call his own, all these things were rooted so deep within him it would take more than the Romulan Empire's worst to dig them out. He tried a protest.

"Surely you'll get some credit for spreading - what's the jargon - black propaganda?"

Kirk smiled tiredly. "That's the real irony of it - if I'd known a little more I could have done some real damage. As it was most of what I told them won't fool them for more than a few weeks or months. They'll find out about the new sensors some other way, they'll improve their shielding and we'll have to find something else to do to regain the upper hand." He yawned and stretched. "Mind you," he said, "I'd like to be a fly in the shuttle when they try to find the dilithium on Beratacri III."

McCoy found his hopes rising at this sign that even torture had not entirely eradicated the schoolboy side of Kirk's sense of humour. They had surveyed the planet over a year ago and found nothing much except high winds, sand and a parasitic fly with a craving for copper-based blood. The Romulans would not enjoy the planet one little bit.

McCoy tried again, half for his friend's sake and half for his own. "Are you sure you're not being too dam' pessimistic about this? You got away leaving the Romulans with nothing but trash - that's gotta be worth something!"

"Oh, it'll make no difference. I know exactly what Starfleet'll do - I've always known. If they think I'm guilty they'll try me and lock me up, but if they think I'm innocent, it'll be even worse."

The certainty in his voice was chilling and they were forced to remember that here was a man who knew and understood the inner workings of the organisation to which they all belonged and who could predict with precision how it would react.

"They'll tell me that it's my duty to let the misinformation run its course, causing the maximum possible disruption to the Empire, no matter how trivial that proves to be. They will point out regretfully but firmly that while they of course believe me, nobody else ever will, and that unless I join the Orions, I'll never sit in a Captain's chair again. They'll try to persuade me that my last sacrifice for the flag and my oath should be to let myself be tried for a crime I haven't committed.

"By that time Good Ol' Jim'll probably be back and he's always been a sucker for that sort of talk, so there'll be a show trial and I'll be sentenced to imprisonment in exile someplace light

years away from anywhere, where no-one will ever go and check. They'll take my medals off me in public and give 'em all back in private, probably with one or two extra. Then they'll pay me a lot of money which they'll call a pension but which everybody involved will know is really conscience money and ship me off permanently to somewhere isolated but not unpleasant."

His mouth twisted bitterly, "And if I really lose all self-respect they'll even supply me with a steady stream of women paid to come out and spend a year or so sleeping with me."

They all sat for a long time, a deeply wronged man and his friends, none of them wanting to believe the worst but all of them knowing it was all too likely to happen. Kirk felt tired and empty but at least some of the tension that had gripped him ever since he had arrived on board had dissipated; now all he wanted was sleep. There was only one last duty to perform and then he could let go. He glanced at the chrono - 1.00 am ship's time. He looked at the Doctor, read his distress and knew there was nothing he could do to alleviate it except send him to bed, so he did.

Spock too got up to leave but caught sight of a quick shake of the head and stayed behind. As soon as the door closed behind a dejected McCoy, Kirk came round the desk and looked up into the face some called impassive but which he could read as easily as the Bridge screen.

"How much?" he asked quietly.

The Vulcan did not reply; he merely raised an eyebrow.

Kirk shook his head. "C'mon Spock, scar tissue isn't the only thing I've picked up over the last few months. My

'conversational Romulan' improved by leaps and bounds. I'm not up to Uhura's standard but I overheard them talking and even I can work out what 'blood price' probably means. You're the only person I know with the money to do it and the brains to work out how. I wasn't sure until just now or I would have said something sooner. So - how much did you pay for me?"

Spock could not lie but did not want to tell the whole truth. "Considerably less than I was prepared to," he said calmly.

"Are you going to tell me how much?"

"No."

"Nor how you did it?"

"No - although in truth it was not difficult. Like all military dictatorships the Empire is riddled with corruption and there are always neutrals and renegades who are prepared to trade over the Neutral Zone."

Kirk smiled slightly and bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Very well," he said gravely, "I shall not seek to devalue your gift by inquiring further; still less by saying that you should not have made it. You cannot hide behind the formula about 'a valuable Starfleet officer' this time, my friend and brother, for we both know my career is over. This was for me and I am both grateful and honoured."

Spock returned the bow and stood searching for the right response. "You are my Captain and my friend," he said eventually. "All I have ever known of friendship and community has been a gift from you. The debt is all upon my side."

Then, before emotions got completely out of control, he changed the subject. "Jim, I truly do not see why you

are in such distress. Is there nothing I can do?"

Kirk looked him straight in the eye. "No, you can't help with this," he said, and sighed. "I want what I can't have - I want to feel... decent again, and I want to feel in control of my life." Anger began to build again as he remembered his helplessness, his jaw tightened and his voice became harsh. "And most of all, right now I want to find a fist fight and pound three kinds of shit out of somebody."

Spock recoiled slightly from the violence in his friend's voice; Kirk saw him do it and started to apologise. Spock's raised hand stopped him and when the Vulcan spoke the deep voice was solemn, the words a benediction.

"You have no reason to feel guilt about any of this, my T'hy'la. What you see as weakness is only your inability to control the uncontrollable. You are still the 'master of your fate and the captain of your soul', " he said, paraphrasing an ancient poem they both knew, "but you cannot command the actions of your enemies nor can you govern the response of our superior officers. Let them react how they will but be assured of this - to those who know you, you are as you have always been, a man we are proud to know and would be proud to serve under once again."

He stood for a moment as though assessing the effect of what he had said then, once assured that he had struck home, he turned on his heel and left. Although they never spoke of it again Kirk never forgot the moment and carried the words with him, like medals, until the day he died.

First watch the next day began with

Spock on the Bridge and Kirk and McCoy in Sickbay, the Doctor having finally persuaded his friend that even Starfleet did not expect him to risk blood poisoning from his wounds. McCoy could see there had been an improvement; for one thing, although Kirk still insisted on his own guilt, he had obviously had his first decent night's sleep since he came aboard. McCoy was just about to congratulate himself on the success of his strategy when the shipwide speakers burst into life.

Red Alert! Red Alert! All hands to battle stations! This is not a drill!"

McCoy turned. "Hey, Jim..." he began and was just in time to see Kirk dashing out of the door struggling back into his shirt as he ran. "Talk about Pavlovian responses," he muttered as he joined his staff in preparing Sickbay for the worst.

Kirk entirely forgot about his demotion until the moment he catapulted out of the turbolift to hear the Security man's delighted yell of "Captain on the Bridge!" For a split second he checked and then the pull was too strong: Spock rising from the command chair relief in every line of his body; the happy grins exchanged between Sulu and Chekov; the soft "Yes!" from Uhura; his own rising excitement - this was where he belonged, this was something he could do and do well. Starfleet would really have his guts for it and he couldn't have cared less.

"Okay, Spock, what have we got?"

"Long range sensors have just detected signs of an on-going battle ahead. Two Federation frigates, probably Indomitable and Gustavus Adolphus, engaged against an unknown number of Romulan vessels of similar configuration that are flickering in and out of a cloaked condition, firing at will. The situation is

complicated by the presence of a civilian convoy consisting of a further 4 vessels, including the liner Terran Princess. The frigates are having to extend their shields over the civilian craft."

"Civilians! What the blazes are they doing out here?"

"I believe they may be colonists taking the direct route to the new settlement on Epsilon Decani IV."

"Hell of a dangerous short cut! Uhura, can you track the Romulans?"

"Not at this distance, sir - the other ships are masking the readings. And sir - I'm picking up a message to the Gustavus from the Hood, it's a Code four, tight-band micro-squirt. The Romulans won't have picked it up. Message reads, 'Hang on, we're coming - ETA five hours.'"

Kirk bit at his knuckle in a familiar gesture that sent a warm feeling running through her. *Of all the stupid things to get emotional at*, she thought.

"They're not going to last that long. Can you find the cloaked ships if we get closer?"

Her stomach plunged but she forced herself to consider the problem. "Probably, given long enough - but I can't guarantee it, sir."

He smiled, a huge, charming, reassuring grin. "One of these days, Lieutenant, you're going to realise how good you are and there'll be no holding you back." Then he was all business again. "Get Palmer up here, she can take comms while you're busy with Spock."

Spock came down from his station to the command chair. "Captain," he said carefully, "I cannot advise engaging the Romulans so close to the civilian vessels.

In the event of a matter/antimatter explosion it is unlikely that the frigates' shields would be sufficient to protect them."

"Then we'll have to draw them away. You two make sure you don't lose them once you've tagged them. Scotty, I want absolutely everything we've got to the shields as soon as we drop out of warp, including the warp drive, the impulse engines, the phasers and every non-essential system on board. Just leave Sulu enough to correct for drift."

"Sirr! If the shields go we'll be dead in the water!"

Kirk smiled affectionately. He knew that and he knew that Scotty knew that he knew; the Engineer just wanted to say it out loud. "Noted, Mr Scott. Now jump to it, and I want shield condition showing on the navigator's screen where I can see it."

Mind now up to racing speed he thumbed the intercom. "Crewman Chakravati to the Bridge." He caught sight of Spock looking at him with mildly bemused interest. Chakravati was a low-ranking member of the Quartermaster's Department, notable only for a completely expressionless face which in fact belied an unusually cheerful disposition.

"Chekov, plot me an intercept course, an elliptical curve to bring us in from 241 mark 7. Sulu, I want one of the aft phasers ready to fire into the shields, 10% power and pulse it - I want those shields to shine." They hurried to obey, an almost tangible excitement sweeping over them, part relief, part trust and part terror. Whatever was going to happen it surely wouldn't be dull.

Palmer arrived at a run and took up comms. Uhura moved over to the console

next to Spock's and began to set up for the search they were about to make.

Kirk considered for a second. There was no going back now. He threw the last of his caution to the winds, pressed a button on the arm of his chair and spoke to the ship.

"All hands, this is the Captain." In Sickbay McCoy's jubilant yell was heard two decks away. "There's a battle going on and there are civilians involved. I'm going to try talking, so don't be surprised if nothing much happens for a while - don't lose your edge, we could be fighting at any second." He hesitated. *What the hell*, he thought, *I might never get another chance to say it.* "Whatever happens, I'm proud and grateful for this chance to serve with you again."

The ensuing silence was ruptured as Chakravati shot onto the Bridge, impassive as ever, with only the trembling of his hands revealing his shock. Kirk swung the chair round to look at him.

"Don't look so worried, man, you're in no more trouble than the rest of us."

The crewman's hands stopped trembling; there was something infectious about the Captain's ferocious high spirits.

"You're going to be the Enterprise's telepathic tracker - go sit at the Environmental Control Station. If we get on screen with the Romulans close your eyes and look inscrutable. Every few minutes go and whisper in Mr Sulu's ear. The Romulans think we're using specially trained telepaths to track them while they're cloaked."

"Why on Earth wud they think a thing like that?" Scotty, looking up from his station, was openly baffled.

Kirk's eyes were dancing. "Somebody must have told them - I can't think who. If they're all wearing lead-lined helmets we'll know they believed it. Phaser programmed?"

"Aye, sir."

"And course plotted, sir."

"Then take us in, Mr Sulu. Warp 6 as long as it's safe, then full impulse to five thousand K and all stop. Then prepare some evasives. Chekov, I want the light show as soon as we drop out of warp."

Spock looked up from his console, his eyes if not his expression faintly alarmed. "Captain, if your intention is to make the Romulans believe we have new shielding technology it will not take them long to realise this is a mere ruse."

"Doesn't have to last long, Spock. Just long enough for you two to find the ships and for me to get 'em mad enough to chase after us. We just have to keep them on the hop 'til then. Uhura, anything yet?" She shook her head and he swung the chair back to look at the screen. "Sulu?"

With the ease of long practice the unasked question was answered. "Intercept in 2 minutes 12 seconds."

"Good. Listen up, everyone. Sooner or later they're going to try and use our old prefix code. Scotty, on my signal I want you to repower the engines; Chekov, you turn out the lights, and Sulu, get us the hell out of there. Synchronise between yourselves, you'll have about half a second to do it in."

Chekov wiped his sweating palms on the leg of his pants and tried to cultivate some Vulcan calm. It didn't work.

On the Bridge of the Terran Princess a terrified and exhausted Captain Walker and his crew watched in astonishment as, like an avenging angel, a ship coruscating in silver and blue suddenly hurtled out of nowhere and joined the battle.

His comms officer lifted a startled head and shouted over the klaxon blare of the red alert, "It's the Enterprise!"

He touched a button and the Bridge heard a relaxed, confident voice say with unmistakable relish, "This is Captain James T Kirk of the USS Enterprise. Romulan Commanders, surrender or I'll blast you out of the stars."

Captain Walker blinked and a sudden wave of hope swept over him. He forgot recent history and remembered only the stories of victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, the miraculous escapes, the lives saved. "Put this out shipwide," he said. "Let's give our passengers some hope."

Back on the Enterprise Palmer was receiving. "Sir, I have a Romulan Commander, visual." As Kirk had hoped, the shock of hearing who was in command had tempted someone into contact.

"Uhura, have you traced the source?"

"Not yet, sir."

"On screen then."

The picture wavered and steadied, and there was a spontaneous and utterly genuine burst of laughter; all the Romulans they could see were indeed wearing cumbersome, metal helmets, not the light skull caps known to be uniform for some lower ranks but enormous clumsy artefacts with huge earpieces to enable them to hear without loss of

shielding.

Every ship in the area was picking up the transmissions from both sides and the colonists, all twenty-three thousand of them, were clustered round the view screens in their ships. They saw a Romulan commander, his face contorted with fury, confronting a casually-dressed young Human who obviously trying hard not to laugh. A new legend began to form.

Kirk pulled himself together. "I'm sorry," he managed eventually when he had command of his trembling lips. "That was very rude - private joke, I'm afraid." Beneath the hectic thrum of adrenalin in his voice was the authentic ring of amusement.

Lieutenant-Commander Bailey, formerly of the Enterprise and now in command of the Indomitable following the death of all his senior officers, recognised a familiar note - Kirk was up to something. His heart soared.

"Now, where was I?" The question was plainly rhetorical. "Oh yes - surrender or I'll blast you out of the stars." He folded his hands and stared at the screen with an air of cheerful expectation.

A cloaked ship shimmered into existence, let loose a shot and recloaked. The Enterprise rocked and steadied. Kirk ignored it. "Well, come along, I haven't got all day. Are you going to surrender or aren't you?"

The Romulan Commander sneered. "I surrender to no man, least of all you, Oathbreaker!"

"Oathbreaker!" Kirk looked openly incredulous and he stared at the screen as though he could not believe his ears. Then when he spoke his voice was full of

amused contempt. "You poor, sad sack, son of a bitch," he said with gentle mockery, "you really believed it all, didn't you? You still do!"

He sat back, folded his arms and snorted with derision. "For heavens sake, man, I'm a Starship Captain. They don't let just anybody drive one of these things, you know. We're trained to resist and I did. I realise people don't normally survive the Imperial Examiner-General but then again," he said, smiling sunnily, "I'm not normal. Have you any idea how much it costs to find and train someone like me? Hell, with that many credits you could buy a decent meal for everyone on your planet."

He grinned and digressed infuriatingly. "Which wouldn't be a bad idea. You people have terrible food. Nobody expects haute cuisine in a torture chamber, but how any sentient species can consider that treif stuff edible is beyond me!"

"Forswor..."

Kirk appeared irritated. He jumped to his feet. "Messhetik!" he said harshly, and the Romulan blinked at the gross obscenity. "Did you really think all you had to do was grab a Starship Captain, jump up and down on him for a couple of months and he'd tell you everything he knew?" The scorn was laser-edged. "I don't know which is worse, the insult or the stupidity."

Behind him he heard Uhura's voice say softly, "One," and swept on, warming to his subject and ignoring more hits to the deflectors. "Think about it! If I am a traitor what am I doing sitting in this chair?"

Then, with one of the disconcerting flashes of insight that made people wonder if his esper rating was really as

low as he claimed, he seemed to read the Romulan's mind. He leaned forward, one hand on Sulu's shoulder and half-whispered in conspiratorial fashion, "Unless this is all a bluff to make you think the stuff I told your people was false when in fact it's all true."

He paused for a moment's pregnant silence then straightened up and grinned happily. "In which case, is the fact that I've mentioned the idea actually a cunning double bluff?" He spread his hands as though inviting the Romulan to join in the game. "And what's more, now that I've mentioned that I've mentioned it, does that constitute a *triple* bluff?" Behind him he heard somebody giggle and had to bite his lip to prevent himself joining in: adrenalin-fuelled hysteria was dangerously close.

The Romulan Commander, who had been wondering about the possibility of just such a trick, was stung by both the insight and the farcical nonsense Kirk had spun out of the idea. He launched himself into an argument he should have ignored. "You did not resist - you proclaimed your faithlessness before the whole Empire."

Kirk dropped back into his chair, laughing. "Commander," he said, "I don't care if the entire Romulan Empire thinks I eat babies for breakfast, with a side order of strangled kittens. I still came out ahead of the game." His tone was lightly taunting, "After all - your people had me. I told them a complete load of peltri droppings and not only did they believe me, they let me go afterwards! Pretty dumb or what?" *Careful*, he thought, *this is getting juvenile - you'll be sticking your tongue out next.*

Juvenile or not, it seemed to be working. The other enemy ships must have been monitoring the exchange because they abandoned their original prey and concentrated all their fire on the

Enterprise. The enhanced shields, boosted by the full power of a Starship, held. On the Federation frigates damage control parties seized the respite and started on emergency repairs.

The Romulan Commander had the hunted look of a man who has lost command of events. The forlorn, stuttering wreck he had seen on the newsnets might never have existed; the man on his screen exuded certainty, authority and the confidence that comes from having the upper hand. Doubt began to coil in his mind. The shield readings were so peculiar... He started as his second in command cut off audio, leaned forward and said something.

Kirk, effortlessly reading lips with a skill born out of his terrified captivity, answered the question before it was asked, shocking the Romulans still further. "Yes, I am out of uniform. Thanks to your food and the Imperial Examiner-General none of mine fit any more. I didn't expect an Admiral's inspection out here so I didn't bother reprogramming the fabricator. Next question?"

Uhura's voice said "Two" as he grinned and launched back into speech; no point in giving them time to catch their breaths.

"Of course," he said cheerily, leaning back in the chair and putting his hands in his pockets, "this really *could* be an enormous bluff. Perhaps I *am* forsworn. Perhaps it was all true - the stuff I told the Examiner-General. Perhaps when I said just now I was lying - I was lying. Perhaps they only let me out of the Brig a few minutes ago because I'm so dam' good at beating you people. Who knows?" He shrugged. "Perhaps I'm not even the real Kirk."

He waited just long enough for startled speculation to creep into the eyes

on the screen then he reached up, grasped the collar of his shirt and pulled it over his head in a single, fluid movement. "Wrong again!" he said smugly, and peered down at the tattoo. "Impressive, isn't it? I'd half a mind to keep it as a souvenir until I realised they'd spelt my name wrong. There is no 'hir' in Kirk!"

Sulu felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. There was something frightening about the Captain in this mode. He knew that Kirk was monitoring not only Chekov's but also his own display by the way a seemingly careless hand had pressed him to one side when he had obscured the monitor; Kirk was also listening to the by-play between Spock and Uhura and at the same time controlling the Romulan Commander, tantalising him with glimpses of the truth but never giving him time to think, keeping him angry and off balance and (most importantly of all) in communication. By flaunting his identity he had drawn the enemy ships away from the other Federation vessels in the knowledge that, for the time being at least, the Enterprise could stand it. What he was doing was insanely dangerous, completely necessary and utterly masterful.

The soft voice said, "Three."

Kirk was still talking, constantly needling, stoking the fury he could see in the alien face on the screen. "By the Five and the One," he said, using the ancient Romulan curse, his accent very nearly perfect. "You people are such idiots! I bet you even went looking for the Federation's secret dilithium dump on Beratacri III." His voice laced the idea with just enough melodrama to make it totally ludicrous.

McCoy, crowding round the viewscreen in Sickbay with his nurses, watched with jubilation as, wearing his

mutilation with jaunty insouciance and in dramatic pictures that were being recorded on the liner and would soon be flashed all over the Federation. Kirk wrote himself back into the history books on the side of the angels.

"Four."

"So, Commander, what you have to ask yourself is - have we really got enhanced shields or is this a trick? Is Kirk lying when he says he was lying *then* or is he lying when he says he's telling the truth *now*?" He hoped the translators could keep up with this babble.

"Five, and that's it." Quietly Uhura sent the final coordinates to Helm and weapons stations where computer target-lock was engaged. Now everybody knew where the enemy were and, thanks to the new equipment and the skills of those who manned it, would not lose them when the real fighting started.

Kirk checked the shield status. They couldn't last much longer - time to wind this up. The inane grin was starting to make his jaw ache but he plastered it back over his face and gave the Romulans one last shove.

"Or maybe some of what I told your people was true and some of it wasn't. After all we found you, didn't we? Was that luck or was it Chakravati here?" He waved an airy hand towards the stone-faced crewman. "Has one of you people left his helmet off and let his psi-waves leak out, or are you all wearing tea kettles on your head for nothing?"

The Romulan visibly flinched at that last crack and turned to snarl something to a crewman standing behind him. This was it.

"Stand by, Scotty." The words were breathed just below the chair's audio

pick-up level.

Palmer spoke behind him. "Incoming prefix code."

"No!" Kirk leaped to his feet, terror painted all over his face. With pre-arranged precision Mr Scott re-routed the energy back to his engines, Chekov dropped the 'light show' and Sulu thrust the Enterprise forwards and 'down' under the lead Romulan ship.

Within five seconds the Enterprise was surging through hyper-space at warp seven, the pre-set evasive course a seemingly random trail of twists and turns; within ten seconds all the Romulan ships were tearing after them, weapons blazing, half-believing that the end of the coruscating corona meant that the enemy's shields were down.

Kirk stood, mock terror gone, his attention straining as though he could actually force himself see what was happening behind. "Are they all following us?"

"Affirmative."

"Do we have still have lock on them?" He shifted his stance as a glancing blow to the shields rocked the ship.

"Affirmative."

"Spock, what's the spread?"

Spock leaned over his monitor and glanced into its blue light; effortlessly he correlated the sensor readings and the communications traffic and produced a figure that would have taken most Humans several minutes. "Eleven point five light weeks."

"Damn, too far apart." Kirk thought for a few seconds, rapidly running through and discarding strategies, then

decided. "Chekov - I want a cluster of torpedoes jettisoned - not fired - from the portside bays, timed to detonate as we drop out of warp. Sulu, throw her into a double Moebius, five million K diameter, minus 80 degrees to the galactic plane. Signal when ready; we jettison and drop out of warp the next near miss or hit to the shields."

By this time the whole Bridge crew were working at the heightened pitch that only mortal danger produces. Swiftly the men at Helm and Navigation performed the necessary operations, working together, sharing their data with the perfect harmony formed over their weeks and months of service, neither of them waiting to work out what was happening, both content to trust.

The great ship tumbled into a twisting loop, regular enough for the computer to be able to calculate the detonation time, complex enough to evade attack and to hide its true form from the Romulans for the few seconds necessary for the scheme to work.

Chekov's call of "Ready!" and a massive hit to the deflectors followed close on one another. The torpedo explosion and the warp dump which ensued appeared simultaneous and the Romulan ships, believing their enemy mortally wounded, closed for the kill as they too dropped out of warp.

"Fire all phasers and starboard torpedoes." Spock came and stood beside him, his presence indicative of complete confidence in the strategy. "Portside torpedoes - stand by. Mr Sulu, continue evasives."

As he waited Kirk felt the dawning creep of regret at the back of his skull and realised that 'Good Ol' Jim' was back; all those brave men and women; all those families he was about to bereave. He

knew that the choice between friend and foe was no choice at all but still...

Watching on long-range sensors the crews of the Indomitable and the Gustavus Adolphus saw the Enterprise burst into existence, the lancing dart of phaser fire, the comet leap of torpedoes apparently into empty space and the obscene blossom of antimatter explosions as the Romulan ships, cloaked but only lightly shielded, flamed and died.

Kirk stared at the screen until he received formal confirmation of the hits and then dropped back into his chair, the draining away of adrenalin leaving him feeling suddenly tired and depressed. He looked round for the shirt he'd tossed aside; it was getting chilly.

"Scan for escape pods." There was no hope but he gave the order anyway, then, "All decks, damage control reports."

"No sign of survivors, Captain."

His lips tightened and after a few moments he asked softly, "How many were there on those ships, Spock?"

"There is no accurate..."

"Spock." He was neither angry nor irritated, he merely insisted on knowing.

"Approximately one thousand." Diagnosing his mood with an expert eye, the Vulcan picked up the shirt and handed it to his Captain. "There are many thousands of men, women and children on the colonists' ships," he said. "They are the innocents."

Kirk nodded in appreciation of the thought. There would come a time when it would help; it wasn't now. "Okay, Mr Sulu, take us back to the convoy, full impulse."

The Bridge crew slumped in their seats, maintaining only sufficient attention to guard against sudden attack. Only now did they understand what they had been doing. Sulu, clenching and unclenching fists that had locked, so fierce had been his concentration, knew that he had seen an artist at work. The difference between a master craftsman and mere workmen demonstrated on a huge canvas, millions of kilometres wide, a feat all the more remarkable because of the hatred for death that lay beneath it.

He glanced behind him and saw the Captain, grave-faced and shivering slightly, and noticed his whole body relax as the "No serious casualties" report came in. Suddenly and for the first time Sulu appreciated the duality at the heart of command - the drive to save life only accomplished by the risking and the taking of it. Half appalled, half exhilarated at the prospect, he wondered if he was fit for the responsibility.

"Go to yellow alert." Kirk rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands as his yeoman, realising that civilian clothes would not be as temperature responsive as a uniform, arrived with coffee and a warm sweater. Despite his usual dislike of "mother hens" he was grateful for both, and said so.

The next few minutes were spent reviewing the damage reports and Scott's repair schedule, then he took a drink of his coffee and called, "Listen up, everybody."

The Bridge crew turned to the centre chair. "Well done," he said simply, and caught each pair of eyes in succession for a second of individual communication and appreciation. Spines stiffened. Mr Scott, passing behind his chair, patted his shoulder, an almost fatherly gesture, part congratulation, part consolation.

A few seconds later McCoy erupted into the busy quiet of the Bridge, folded his arms and surveyed him sardonically. The Doctor knew exactly how he was feeling and set out to give his own brand of comfort, working as ever on the counter-irritant principle. "You read too many comic books as a kid. 'Surrender or I'll blast you out of the stars!' indeed. I'm never gonna let you hear the end of that one! Who do you think you are? The Last Galactic Hero?"

"I was trying to get his goat." Despite his mood Kirk found himself answering defensively. Spock opened his mouth but Kirk glared at him, "And I don't need any 'Captain, what does a Terran animal of the caprine variety have to do with the situation' comments from you, Spock. Just once in a while you two might like to consider letting me be depressed in peace."

McCoy opened his mouth to argue but they were interrupted.

"Sir, I have the Indomitable and the Gustavus calling." Uhura had reclaimed her station.

Kirk groaned, remembering his status. "I suppose it's too late to go to the Brig?" he said ruefully.

"Almost certainly," answered Spock calmly.

"Oh well, on screen."

The stars vanished and were replaced by a split screen showing the damaged Bridges of the two frigates. Kirk flushed as, amidst the smoke, the surviving officers could be seen standing and applauding.

Captain T'Sao of the Gustavus was receiving treatment to a shoulder wound but she still managed to salute. "Captain

Kirk," she began and from that first tiny step his acceptance back amongst his peers began.

Whatever Starfleet Command itself would have done was neatly pre-empted by a grateful Captain Walker, who quickly released his recordings of the ship-to-ship transmissions to the media. The irresistible combination of victory and humour under adversity soon ensured that they were played, replayed and played again on Tri-V and newsnet stations all over the Federation. As McCoy pointed out with ego-deflating accuracy, the fact that the entire battle could be rerun between commercial breaks probably didn't hurt either.

As the Enterprise made its way to Earth, throughout the Federation the engagement was being analysed in depth by public commentators and print medium columnists, complete with diagrams and careful explanations of exactly why the Romulans had become so enraged.

This very quickly developed into complimentary examinations of the Enterprise's other missions; then favourable articles began to appear in even the least intellectual sections of the press; popular comedians wrote the events into their routines; a regrettably vulgar song about the incident became wildly popular; books were written and politicians queued to applaud the victor of what the media christened 'Kirk's Second Battle of the Neutral Zone'.

Public opinion, always hungry for heroes and particularly desperate for encouraging news from the dangerous Romulan frontier, swung back in the Captain's favour and by the time the ship arrived in Earth orbit it was all over bar the shouting.

Even before then McCoy got

permission to treat his friend's remaining scars and injuries by the simple expedient of leaking his complaint to the Medical Ethics Bureau to the press, complete with pictures. What he caustically referred to as 'Permission to heal' came precisely twenty-four hours after the story broke.

Hardly anybody, even among his worst enemies, could believe in Kirk's guilt now that the military secrets he was supposed to have betrayed were being laughed at on every planet in the Federation. The massive publicity also ensured that there could be no question of a show trial or indeed of any disciplinary action against the Enterprise crew as a whole. In the face of the victory and the lives saved who could possibly object publicly to the relinquishment of command to the man who had won that victory and saved those lives?

There were those who ascribed his changing fortunes to outrageous good luck or to the intervention of some deity or other; the Communion of the Strictly Devout on Nova Sionis, who had hated him ever since he refused to let them burn one of his crew as a witch, even blamed the Prince of Darkness. But those who knew him well recognised just another demonstration of his gift for exploiting the turns of fate and were grateful that, in saving others, he had been able to save himself.

Those who knew him very well indeed even had a sneaking suspicion that the battle might have been deliberately fought in a way likely to catch the public eye and thus pave the way for his return to active duty, especially as Uhura reported a number of private conversations between Captains Kirk and Walker. However when taxed with this, during one of the many riotous parties which the various departments on board took turns in throwing to celebrate his re-appointment as Captain, he merely

laughed and declared himself flattered by the compliment to his intelligence. A lot of people noted that this was not actually a denial.

His court-martial was one of the shortest on record. Afterwards Starfleet even gave him another medal, though McCoy, catching sight of the expression on his face at the presentation ceremony, was not surprised that he never afterwards wore it.

However if the Board of Inquiry had been a formality the public acclaim was a horrible embarrassment, and the day after one of the Tri-V gossip shows discovered and announced that James T Kirk had received proposals of marriage (or near equivalent) from 12,538 women, 2,794 men and almost 400 beings for whom the distinction was irrelevant, he decided he'd had enough.

During a hunted and desperate visit to Sickbay McCoy was bribed with shameless promises of improved equipment and regular and uncomplaining attendance at physicals to issue a bulletin.

"Doctor Leonard H McCoy MD, FGIM, FGIXS Chief Medical Officer USS Enterprise.

"With effect from 0900 hours today Captain Kirk is confined to his quarters under quarantine. No shore visits will be possible and all appointments are hereby cancelled. Quarantine will remain in effect until after ship's departure.

"The Captain is suffering from chicken pox."

MY SON NO MORE

No, my son, it cannot be.
You chose the Vulcan way,
So you must follow me,
As my father's lead I followed,

To the Vulcan Science Academy,
Not to Starfleet, as you wish.
How can you think to leave your family,
To make your home among the stars?

No, Spock, you cannot have my consent
To defy your Vulcan heritage.
If this request you really meant,
I consider you my son no more.

Your mother waits in the garden.
I will not deny her this last need.
Though your defiance I cannot pardon
She won't pay the price of my Vulcan pride.

Maureen Frost.

THIRD WHEEL

We always crack a bottle after shore leave,
 me an' Jim. Kinda... traditional.
 Well, more like a ritual: gathering' the threads,
 findin' our place again.
 Can't remember the last time we *didn't* do it -
 until tonight.
 Got the two glasses out, same as usual,
 then the damn fool calls up an' says he's not comin'.
"You don't mind, do you, Bones? Spock and I
haven't seen each other in over a month... got a lot of
catching up to do."
 Me, mind? Yeah, damn right I mind!
 What about you 'n' me, Jim -
 we haven't seen much of each other, either.
 Don't *we* have catchin' up to do? To say nothin'
 of a good bottle goin' to waste,
 an' after I picked it up 'specially, on Rigel. Cost me
 a goddam fortune.
 Well, I sorted that one out. Drank your share, too.
 No sense in wastin' it, right?
 So, how come you're with him, anyway?
 It's happenin' more and more lately -
 have you noticed?
 Always used to be me you'd go to -
 when the job got too much, when you needed to talk.
 Now, sometimes, it's him.
 Oh, you still come, there are still things
 it's easier to talk to me about than him.
 But is it my imagination, or does that list
 keep gettin' smaller all the time?
 Hell! I know it's crazy, but I just feel
 like you're... easin' me away.
 Used to be a pretty exclusive club, our friendship...
 Not anymore. Or maybe - maybe it still *is*
 an' you an' Spock, you've formed another club,
 of an entirely different kind.
 Membership by invitation only - an' I haven't been invited.
 Childish, huh? Yeah, well, I'm feelin' pretty childish right now.
 That, and left out.
 There, I've said it. I feel left out.
 And jealous, sometimes, of the way you two
 have grown so close. Sometimes it's almost... spooky -
 like a look is all you need; like words are just the trimmings
 on a deeper conversation - one that no-one else can hear.
 How can he tell when you're in trouble?
 How d'you know what's goin' on in that shut-an'-bolted mind?
 Would you have risked your life an' your command

for *me*, if I'd've been the one to need your help?
 No, that's not fair. I know you would've done.
 It's just... I feel *alone*.
 I know you're still my friend (god knows, I know I'm his as well
 even if hoards of rabid Klingons couldn't drag the words
 from either of our throats!)
 But it'll never be the same for you 'n' me.
 We'll never share that same rapport you've found with him.
 I see that now
 an' I've just gotta learn to live with it, to let it be.
 I should be glad, considerin' how good you are for one another.
 Even a fool can see it
 (an' I qualify, in that respect, for sure.)
 You're still the one who takes it all to heart -
 that much'll never change -
 but maybe just a little of Spock's calm has... rubbed off, in
 some way.
 An' peace of mind's a rare and precious gift.
 Spock? He seems... brighter... and more comfortable with life.
 Like your acceptance means that he can let himself *belong*.
 Yup. Can't deny it.
 When the pieces came together, they just fit.
 So why you feelin' sorry for yourself, Doc?
 It keeps 'em out of Sickbay, off your couch,
 so why the hell complain?

"Kirk to Sickbay... Bones? I just remembered our bottle.
 Mind if Spock and I come down and share a glass or two?"

There, see! What were you so goddamned worried about?
 Knew he wouldn't forget.
 Three years of friendship has to count for *somethin'*.
 'Course he still needs you - both of 'em do -
 where'd they be without good ol' RX McCoy:
 a pill or a pearl for every occasion.
 God... gettin' kinda sentimental now.
 Must be the drink talkin'.
 (That reminds me - better get some more out before they
 arrive.)
 They say you see life differently
 through the bottom of a bourbon bottle - an' I guess they're
 right.
 Only *different* evidently don't always mean *worse*.
 Well, here's to you, world! How d'you do?
 Name's McCoy, third wheel,
 an' happy to be here.

Lee Sansome



AILIS

by

Pen Cramphorn

Captain James T Kirk of the Starship Enterprise sat at a table in the Officers' Mess and prodded his breakfast eggs with a fork. They looked as uninteresting as he felt.

Next to him Leonard McCoy, his Chief Medical Officer, raised his eyebrows. "Not hungry, Jim?"

"I'm bored, Bones. Bored out of my mind," Kirk told him.

"Order something else, then," shrugged the Doctor.

"I wish I could," Kirk started, then noticing McCoy's puzzled look, frowned. "I'm not talking about *food*, Bones. If we're stuck on this survey much longer..."

McCoy grinned. "Yeah, it was good of you to provide Spock with some entertainment, but I have to agree with you, it is kinda dull for the rest of us."

Kirk had to smile as the thought of the relish with which his half Vulcan First Officer had approached the surveying and charting of a system of small planets they had discovered. Starfleet had ordered them to take as long as necessary in studying the previously unexplored part of the galaxy and logging any data. Which would have been fine had there been anything of interest - to ordinary mortals, at least - to study.

"Yes," said Kirk, "it's just up Spock's street, of course - all very useful stuff," he added quickly, catching McCoy's eye.

The Doctor laughed. "Mind you,

Jim," he said, "I'd rather be doing something boring like this than be up to my eyes in battle casualties. Perhaps we didn't ought to complain."

Kirk looked exasperated. "Hell, Bones, no-one's asking for a war! I just wish life was a little more... challenging."

McCoy raised an eyebrow. "Well, you know the old adage, Jim."

Kirk nodded. "Be careful what you wish for -"

He was interrupted by the voice of Lt Uhura over the intercom. "Captain to the Bridge, please. We are picking up a distress signal."

As Kirk dashed out of the room McCoy shook his head and pushed himself to his feet, muttering wryly, "Because, Jimmy-boy, you might just get it!"

On the Bridge the atmosphere was quietly tense. Spock rose from the command chair as Kirk entered.

"Lt Uhura, please play back the signal for the Captain," he told her.

"Very good, sir."

A second later the distress call was on the air. As Kirk listened he understood why the Bridge crew was so tense. The call was from a child - a child in obvious terror. As it finished he lowered himself into his chair.

"Well, Spock?" he asked. "Where's it coming from?"

Spock looked puzzled. "I am not entirely certain, sir. The signal is very weak, and is coming from the small cluster of planets here." He indicated a group of planets on the main viewscreen. "However, Captain, sensors show no life-form readings whatever."

Kirk stared at him. "Sensor malfunction?"

The Vulcan shook his head. Kirk bit his lip.

By now McCoy had reached the command chair, having caught the tail end of the distress call. "Well we gotta do something, Jim. We can't leave a child down there - wherever!"

"Agreed, Doctor," said Spock. "If indeed there is a child down there."

"I think," Kirk said slowly, "we have to assume there is a child." He looked at Spock. "Mr Spock, assuming that something is blocking our sensors and there are life-forms down there, which of those planets are capable of sustaining life?"

Spock looked at his computer console. "We're talking of humanoid life I presume, Captain?"

Kirk nodded impatiently.

"The prospects are not good on any of the planets," Spock told him, "but I would have to say this one." He pointed to a small planet on the edge of the screen. It was surrounded, like all the others, by a reddish mist.

"Could that mist be interfering with our sensors?" asked McCoy.

"Negative, Doctor." Spock shook his head. "Captain, I recommend we do not transport down until we have more information."

McCoy's eyes bulged. "Goddammit. Spock, there might be children down there! Doesn't that mean anything to your Vulcan brain?"

Spock raised his eyebrows, looking superciliously at McCoy, but before he could make any reply Kirk turned to him.

"Spock, I understand your recommendation; however I don't think we have any choice. I want you two," his glance included McCoy, "to fetch whatever equipment you'll need and meet me in the Transporter Room. Oh, and Bones, bring Nurse Chapel. If there is a child - or children - we'll need a woman along."

As Spock and McCoy left the Bridge he pressed the intercom button. "Security, send two men to the Transporter Room. We're beaming down to the planet." he turned to his Helmsman. "Mr Sulu, you have the con."

In the Transporter Room Scott was waiting at the controls. Spock, McCoy and Christine Chapel were in place. Kirk arrived at the same time as the two Security men. They stepped onto the platform.

"Energise, Mr Scott," said Kirk, and felt the familiar tingle. A few seconds later he materialised - in the Transporter Room.

"What's going on, Scotty?" he asked, baffled.

As Scott opened his mouth to speak Nurse Chapel gasped. "Where are Mr Spock and Dr McCoy?"

Spock and McCoy were at that moment asking themselves an almost identical question. At least, McCoy was. Several times. They had discovered that their communicators were not working and Spock was ignoring McCoy, who was - in Spock's opinion - panicking most predictably. He looked around with something akin to dismay. It was not a pleasant prospect. The planet seemed to be made up of volcanic rock. There was very little vegetation, and no shelter from a very unpleasant wind - not cold, but warm and gritty.

Realising that Spock was no longer listening to him, McCoy grabbed his arm. "Spock, I said what are we gonna do?"

Spock stared at him. He was secretly as worried as McCoy about Jim's whereabouts, and at the same time he was trying to shrug off a most illogical feeling of disaster.

"I obviously know no more than you do, Doctor. We have somehow become separated from the rest of the landing party. I can only speculate on possible reasons for this." As McCoy opened his mouth to interrupt, Spock hurried on, "As further discussion would be fruitless, Doctor, shall we seek some way out of our predicament?"

McCoy closed his mouth on the remark he had been about to make and stared intently at Spock. "Yeah. Sorry, Spock - I guess we're both pretty rattled."

Spock raised an eyebrow but did not comment on the illogical speech. he was used to McCoy's idiosyncrasies. Picking up his tricorder he began to scan their surroundings. McCoy did the same.

"I seem to be getting life-form readings," said Spock.

"Me too," McCoy agreed. "Do you think it's - ?"

"I do not know, Doctor. The readings are very faint. I suggest we try to locate them." He fervently hoped that the direction they would be taking would lead them out of the wind. It was definitely unhealthy - he had been shocked by his tricorder readings.

They walked for some time, and Spock became aware that the odd feeling of disaster he had noticed earlier had strengthened. He glanced at McCoy, who looked up and caught his eye.

The physician gave a twisted smile. "Guess I'm not as fit as I thought, Spock. Those readings don't seem to be getting much nearer, and I'm exhausted." He sighed and licked his lips, which were uncomfortably dry. "I wonder if there's any water around here. I could use a drink," he muttered.

Spock was staring at his tricorder. "It certainly is most illogical..."

He broke off as he looked properly at McCoy; the Doctor's face was flushed, and his eyes looked sore. Spock fiddled with a dial on his tricorder. "There may be a stream over to the right, but I would hesitate to suggest that we could drink from it."

"Well, it's worth a try," said McCoy, visibly brightening as he started off on the new course.

By the time they reached the somewhat brackish water his thirst had increased until it was raging. His lips were beginning to crack, and his head was throbbing. He fell to the ground and scooped up handfuls of water before Spock could stop him.

"Doctor, I have not yet analysed - "

"Forget it, Spock," McCoy told him. "I don't care what's in this water, I'm drinking it anyway."

Spock raised his eyebrows but went on with the scan. "Fortunately it seems unremarkable," he commented, watching McCoy drink until he was full.

The physician raised himself to a sitting position and swayed. "This climate must be affecting me more than I realised," he said.

Spock squatted down next to him. "Doctor, it is not the climate," he said gently. "You are extremely unwell."

McCoy stared at him. His head was sore, and despite the water he had just drunk he again felt thirsty. Slowly he reached into his medikit for his scanner and checked his readings. Spock was right - he had a fever.

He looked up at Spock. "I've only got Benorylate X with me. All the rest of my equipment is with Christine and the others - wherever *they* are," he added bitterly.

"Would that medication be effective in this case?" Spock inquired.

"Well, yes," McCoy said slowly, "but I'm allergic to it."

"In what way, Doctor?"

"It makes me sick."

Spock looked annoyed. "Is this a joke, Doctor?" he asked.

McCoy rubbed his eyes. "I mean it makes me throw up, Spock."

Spock thought that over. "Doctor, it may be advisable for you to take the medication and cope with the effects."

McCoy hesitated. He knew Spock was right, but he was reluctant to relinquish his control. It was not that he had any doubts about the Vulcan's competence, or the level of care Spock would give him; it was just that the Vulcan was always so reserved, so private. Suppose the threw up in front of Spock? How could either of them cope with the embarrassment?

Spock looked as if he knew what was going on in the Human's mind. "It will make no difference to me, Doctor," he said. He looked directly into McCoy's eyes. "You have given me medical aid in the past without regard to the circumstances. I assure you, this will be exactly the same."

McCoy looked back into the dark eyes. *He's entirely without guile, he thought. With Spock, what you see is what you get, if you're astute enough - and sensitive enough - to see past that Vulcan mask.*

He realised then how long it had taken him to overcome his prejudice and to see Spock as Jim saw him - and with a slight shock he realised how very much he liked Spock.

Aloud he said, "Okay, Spock... Just don't start fancying yourself as a Doctor. Remember, I'm the only one with a licence around here."

Spock looked away, satisfied. He filled a hypospray and administered the shot. Within a few seconds McCoy's head had stopped throbbing. However, he could feel the ominous nausea stealing over him.

"I'm gonna have to lie down for a little while, Spock. I'm sorry."

Spock helped him up and they moved away from the water. McCoy propped himself up against a large

outcrop of rock, and drifted off to sleep. Spock stood and gazed towards the distant horizon, then he sank down next to McCoy and put his head into his hands.

"Scotty, what in thunder's going on?" Kirk demanded.

Scott was staring down at the controls in dismay. In response to Kirk's terse order to energise again he shook his head miserably.

"I canna do anything of the sort, Captain. This mechanism is all burned out. It'll take hours, possibly days, to fix it."

As Kirk stared at him, Sulu's voice came over the intercom.

"Mr Scott, we're in trouble here. There's no power to the helm, the controls are burned out all over the Bridge -"

"Sulu," Kirk interrupted, "get a damage report. I'm on my way to the Bridge." He turned to Scott. "Scotty, get down to the Engine Room and see what's going on. Oh, and get someone up here to start work on these controls."

Scott hurried off, and Kirk pressed the intercom button.

"Shuttlecraft Deck, report on shuttlecraft status."

It was not what he wanted to hear. Both shuttlecraft were out of action - temporarily, he was quickly assured - but the controls of both seemed to have been short-circuited.

Swearing softly, Kirk made his way to the Bridge. It was in chaos. Control

panels were burned out, and the Bridge crew were working frantically to restore power. Kirk crossed to Uhura's station, and called Scott.

"Engine Room here." Scott's voice sounded heavy with anxiety.

"What's happening down there, Scotty?"

"The engines are dead, Captain. I dinna know why, and I canna get them to respond."

"I need power now, Scotty. Please, do your best. Kirk out."

He stared helplessly round the Bridge. Spock and Bones could be in all sorts of trouble, and he was worse than useless to them.

On the planet, McCoy had come to. Spock was relieved to see that he was looking less flushed. He bent over the physician.

"Doctor, are you feeling better?"

Unable to speak, McCoy nodded.

Spock studied him for a moment, then continued, "We have to move, Doctor. It is most unhealthy here in this wind. I have calculated that if we climb to the higher ground over to the north," he pointed, "we should find more shelter, and may even be able to communicate with the ship." He didn't really believe the last statement, but he wanted to give McCoy more of an incentive. "Can you walk, Doctor?"

McCoy pulled himself painfully to his feet. His head was throbbing again, but not so badly; however he was once again ragingly thirsty.

"Need a drink," he muttered, and tottered off towards the stream.

Spock followed him. "While you were asleep I fashioned a drinking flask of sorts out of some of the native vegetation." He filled it with water.

McCoy flashed him a look of gratitude. He stood up and swayed against Spock, and as the Vulcan steadied him McCoy realised he had a hypo in his hand.

"No!" he said in alarm, but Spock had administered the drug before he could protest further.

"A reduced dose, Doctor. I read the label and anticipate that you will need it regularly."

McCoy felt a wave of nausea and immediately threw up the water he had just drunk. He sank to his knees.

Spock watched with compassion. He was fully aware of McCoy's reaction to the drug, but he knew the Doctor would be in a considerably worse state without it.

McCoy tried to pull himself to his feet, but without success. Picking up the tricorders, medikit and flask in his left hand, Spock hoisted McCoy over his right shoulder.

"Please do not protest, Doctor," he said quickly. "This is just a temporary measure."

McCoy said nothing; he was already more than half unconscious.

Spock set off at a brisk pace towards the higher ground. After an hour or so McCoy came to, and muttered something about water. As Spock lowered him to the ground the Doctor grabbed the flask

and made to drink it all. Spock took it from him, and McCoy snarled in anger.

"Give it to me, Spock! I need that water."

"I cannot let you drink it all, Doctor," Spock explained patiently. "We have no more, and you will need it later."

"I need it now!" growled McCoy, and swiped at the flask.

Spock lifted it out of his reach and fastened it. He bent to help McCoy up, and as he did so the Doctor lashed out at him, lunging for the flask. Spock was knocked off balance; the flask fell and split open on the hard surface of the planet. The precious water seeped away.

Spock spun McCoy round and dropped him with the Vulcan neck pinch. He looked at the broken flask. Impossible to mend it now. He sighed and hoisted the Doctor's inert body onto his shoulder, then set off towards their destination.

Now he was conscious of thirst, and a dull ache in his head. He was aware also of a diminution of his Vulcan control. He knew that he had wanted to kill McCoy when the Doctor had spilt the water. That worried him even more than his ever-present sense of doom.

Eventually he reached the level he had marked out as being reasonably sheltered from the warm gritty wind. He had hoped to be able to make McCoy comfortable enough here so that he could leave him for a while and try to find the life-forms. However, looking around he was disappointed to find that there was nowhere suitable to leave McCoy. True, the place was sheltered; there was a large, curiously-shaped outcrop of rock about three metres high, but the rest of the terrain was not hospitable. The ground was rocky and hard, and there was no

vegetation at all. The tall outcrop was covered with small, sharp spikes of rock.

Putting McCoy down as gently as he could, Spock inspected the wall. It appeared to be a natural phenomenon. It was certainly most fascinating, Spock thought. Then he turned and picked up his tricorder. The life-form readings were still there, but were now extremely faint. He wondered whether there had ever been any life forms, or if it was a malfunction.

Next to him, McCoy groaned. Spock knelt down beside him.

McCoy opened his eyes. His mouth felt like sandpaper. "Water," he croaked.

Spock rubbed his eyes wearily. "There is no water." With some difficulty he refrained from adding, 'You wasted it,' and instead concentrated on preparing a fresh dose of the medication.

McCoy managed to force some saliva into his mouth, and swallowed. "Spock, I can't take any more of that stuff. It's killing me."

Spock glanced at him. "I think not, Doctor. You are already looking better."

"Well I feel like hell," returned McCoy. "I won't take any more of that stuff." Suddenly he felt furiously angry.

"Doctor, you will obey the orders of a superior officer," said Spock. He'd had just about enough of McCoy, and he didn't feel well enough for another row.

"Superior!" spat McCoy. "Superior to what, you freak?"

Spock almost dropped the hypo in amazement. McCoy thundered on, oblivious.

"You're an emotional cripple, Spock, no better than one of your beloved computers! We're stuck down here on this damned planet, we've got no idea what kind of trouble Jim and Chris Chapel and the rest of the landing party are in - they might even be *dead*, Spock - but that wouldn't bother you, would it? You don't give one good goddamn about anyone, do you, Spock? My superior? I think not. I don't consider you have the right to administer medication to me, and I would be damn grateful if you would go to hell!"

"Doctor," Spock said softly, "are you aware of what you are saying? I think your condition -"

"Don't you dare condescend to me, Spock!" McCoy shouted him down. "I don't want your damn favours!"

Spock's face hardened, and he turned away. "Very well, Doctor," he said wearily, conscious of a feeling of loss. "If that is your decision I can help you no longer."

McCoy's face contorted with a fresh rush of fury. He gave the Vulcan an almighty shove. Spock crashed down onto the hard rock, bringing his hand into contact with the spiked wall. A thick trickle of blood ran down onto his sleeve.

McCoy stood motionless, his eyes half closed, breathing heavily. Spock pulled himself to his feet. He was not really hurt - the cut on his hand was little more than a graze - but he too was now blazingly angry. He turned to McCoy and raised his hand as if to strike the other man.

"If I were not a Vulcan, Doctor..." He broke off, very aware that he need to be alone to regain control. He knew that McCoy's outburst had been due to the fever; he himself had not been able to

maintain control because of it - what chance had McCoy? He had never been noted for any control whatsoever. Everything to excess seemed to be the Doctor's motto, Spock thought. He turned and walked away.

"What's the matter, Spock?" shouted McCoy. "Afraid you might give in to your emotions? Afraid if you stayed here you'd've hit me? You gonna leave me here to die, Spock? You know I'll die if you leave me here. Is that what you want, Spock?"

He broke off as an attack of fever shook him. The rage had left him as suddenly as it had come, and he didn't know what had possessed him. The pain in his head was unbearable. He sank to his knees, his hands pressed to his temples. Almost soundlessly he said, "Spock, don't leave me."

Blackness engulfed him. Then, as if from a great distance, he felt something touching his face, and a blessed ebbing of the pain. He managed to open his eyes. Spock was kneeling beside him, his long fingers spread over McCoy's cheek and temple, his eyes gazing blankly into the distance.

Only McCoy, or Jim Kirk had he been there, would have been aware of the tightness of Spock's jaw as he mastered McCoy's pain. As Spock removed his fingers McCoy saw the Vulcan's body relax. He moved McCoy over to lean against a small boulder.

"Spock..." McCoy whispered.

"Do not try to speak, Doctor," Spock told him. "I am sorry I left you." His voice and face were totally devoid of expression.

McCoy struggled to speak. He had to explain. "No, Spock. I... I have to tell

you... explain... I didn't mean.. those things I said..."

Spock turned to look fully at him. There was sympathy in his eyes. "I understand," he said. "The fever. I have contracted it myself, though in a somewhat milder form. Do you think I would have responded to you in that way if I were myself?"

With some amusement he observed the startled look on McCoy's face. "Leonard," he said patiently, "I understand you very well. Why, after all the years we have known each other, do you refuse to understand me?" Giving McCoy no time to answer he continued, "Doctor, if we are to remain alive we must try to contact the ship somehow - and you must allow me to give you the medication."

McCoy flinched. "Spock, please..."

Spock ignored him, reaching for the hypo.

McCoy said nothing more. He knew he had no strength left to protest. He merely sat and waited for the nausea as the medication flooded into his system.

Spock straightened, aware of how ill he himself was now feeling. Out of a sense of duty more than anything else he reached for his communicator and tried to call the ship. As he expected, there was nothing. He sighed, and wondered if McCoy would be up to moving on soon, although he had no idea where they could move to.

He glanced down at McCoy's inert forms. Something about the way the man was slumped caught his attention. He knelt down. McCoy did not seem to be breathing. His hands trembling slightly, Spock checked McCoy with the mediscanner. Nothing registered. Suspecting

equipment malfunction, he tried the medi-scanner on himself, but it worked perfectly. Stunned, he looked down at McCoy. In disbelief he checked the Doctor once again. Nothing. McCoy was dead.

With great deliberation Spock placed the scanner back in McCoy's medikit. His precision of movement belied the chaos of his thoughts. Had he killed McCoy? McCoy had asked - almost begged - not to be given the last shot. Maybe it was anaphylactic shock. McCoy had said he was allergic to Benorylate X, but surely only to the extent of feeling nauseous.

Spock fought back the fever that was weakening his control, his reactions, his ability to think with lucidity. At the back of his mind he identified the feeling of doom that had been with him throughout his time on this planet. Was it this? A premonition of McCoy's death? But he didn't believe in premonitions, and anyway, the feeling was still with him.

He realised that his thoughts had drifted away from McCoy - deliberately? He didn't know, and let it pass. What could he do about the Doctor? He had nothing with which to cover McCoy's face - something he knew Humans set great store by, although he had never quite grasped why. On an impulse he took off his uniform shirt and, laying McCoy flat, gently placed it over the Doctor's face. He felt guilty that he couldn't bury him, as he knew McCoy would have wished, not could he pray for him. The best he could manage in his present weakened state was a fragment of Human poetry which he had noticed had a profound effect on most Humans. He stood above McCoy's body and folded his hands in front of him.

"He shall not grow old as we that are left grow old," he misquoted

deliberately. *Most illogical*, he could not help thinking. Then there was another line, something about condemning years, but he was too exhausted and ill for his mind to function properly, and he could not remember. He skipped it, and went on to the next line.

"At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we will remember him."

That at least he could say with truth and sincerity. He looked down at the body a last time. No more was it Leonard McCoy. Bones. His friend. Where were Jim, Nurse Chapel, the Security team? On the Enterprise? On the planet? Dead, like McCoy? The last verse of the poem he had misquoted for Leonard flashed into his mind, something singularly appropriate.

"As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end they remain."

He turned blindly, stumbled, and fell.

On the Bridge repairs to the communications panel were nearly complete. Kirk turned in satisfaction to smile at Chekov. If Scotty was doing as well as they were, they should soon be able to get down to that damn planet and find Spock and McCoy.

Suddenly he was blinded by an explosion of intense white light. As Kirk's vision returned he became aware of a presence of some kind. Then his attention was riveted by a figure wrapped in a blue Science shirt huddled against Spock's station.

"Bones!" he shouted.

He yelled into the intercom to M'Benga in Sickbay, then turned towards McCoy, but before he could reach him he again became aware of the presence, and found he could not move. His eyes were drawn to the entity that had appeared to the side of the main viewscreen. It was like a fine web of lights. As he gazed at it, it began to speak.

"I am Ailis. For aeons I have been alone." Its voice was beautiful, soft, feminine, caressing. Kirk felt as if he was in the presence of a beautiful woman.

"I am always alone. Lonely. Alone," the voice continued. "No creature can survive on my planet. For aeons I have been so lonely. So alone." The melodious voice cracked. There was a short silence, the Ailis went on, "Kirk, you have brought me the Vulcan. For this I thank you. In gratitude I return your companion. I hope he will survive." The lights started to flicker and fade.

"Wait! Please!" Kirk shouted urgently. "Ailis, why do you want Spock? The Vulcan? If no creature can survive on your planet, of what use is he to you?"

The lights grew stronger. "Surely you can understand, Kirk? He is a Vulcan. He has no need for emotion, no use for it. I can take this from him. I will never again feel the pain of my loneliness. For aeons I have been alone. I have searched for a being with the Vulcan's power. Now you have brought him to me."

Kirk was stunned. "Ailis, no. That's not the way. Bring Spock back. Come with us."

The lights flickered, then brightened once more. "No. I cannot leave here, for

if I did so I would not continue. I must remain. I must continue. But I cannot endure my loneliness."

Kirk took a step towards Ailis. "We can help you. If you cannot leave your planet, perhaps... maybe an artificial intelligence..."

The voice laughed, a sound like wind chimes. "No, Kirk. Artificial intelligence cannot give me the companionship I seek. I am a sentient being, like you. I need the Vulcan. I can take from him his logic. I can absorb his being into me and become like him. Free... free from loneliness. No longer alone, but complete in myself."

Kirk's head whirled. "But... but Spock is half Human. He has emotions -

Ailis broke in across his words. "Regretfully, his Human half must die. He is already dying of the fever. I cannot delay here if he is to be of use to me. Do not grieve, Kirk. This way he will live forever in me. He will never die, but will know the glory that is Ailis."

The voice faded and there was a light of such intensity that Uhura cried out. For a heartbeat no-one moved, then Chekov, who had been kneeling next to McCoy, looked up.

"Sir, that... that thing said Mr Spock was dying. I think he is also injured. Look." He held up Spock's uniform shirt with the bloodstain on the sleeve.

Kirk started for a second, then shouted into the intercom, "Scotty, get the transporter working! Get me power - NOW!"

Somehow Spock found himself in a

hall of outstanding beauty. He realised he must have blacked out, as he had no memory of getting to this place. Someone - something? - had brought him here. He put his hands to his temples in a vain effort to alleviate the throbbing ache and tried to think. The feeling of despair was still with him.

He looked around. The walls and floor seemed to be made of a marble-like substance, a beautiful pearly-white with veins of soft glowing purple. It was chilly, and Spock shivered. He realised that he was very frightened, and more alone that he - with all his experience of feeling alone - had ever been before.

He backed into a corner of the room. He somehow felt more secure with solid walls behind him, although he immediately dismissed this was emotional nonsense. The position simply gave him a better chance to defend himself if threatened. It was most logical. He shut his eyes and tried to concentrate his mind. He became aware that there was something in the room with him. Slowly he opened his eyes, and blinked in surprise.

Standing before him was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. That was not an expression of emotion, but a plain fact. Obviously not Terran, her hair and skin were the same pearly white as the marble, streaked with soft glowing purple. Her voice was like song. It seemed to caress him as she said,

"Spock, you are here."

He leaned over him and passed a hand across his forehead. Instantly the pain ceased. He stared up at her.

"Come with me, Spock," she said. "I can take you home. Come with me."

He rose, as if in a trance. She took

his hand and led him across the marble room to a door he had not noticed. When she opened it he stopped in bewilderment. The door opened into his quarters on board the Enterprise. He turned to the woman in amazement, but before he could speak she smiled and laid a finger on his lips.

"Hush. I told you I could take you home. No more pain, Spock. No more loneliness. You have been so lonely, Spock."

He tried to tell her that he was no longer lonely, that he had friends - his mind flashed back to Kirk and McCoy - then he remembered that McCoy was dead, perhaps Jim was too. The words died on his lips as she continued.

"Yes, Spock. So alone. I understand. I will heal you. Come with me."

Unresisting, he allowed himself to be led to his bunk. He lay down while she knelt by his side and slipped her arm under his head. With her other hand she caressed his face. He nestled closer to her, feeling her sort glowing hair touching his cheek. He had never been held like this before, so safe, so comforted. Even as a child in his mother's arms he had never felt like this.

"Who are you?" he asked her.

She smiled at him, then her lips brushed his forehead in a kiss. "I am Ailis. I am here to keep you safe, forever. Do you feel safe, Spock? Do you feel happy?"

Spock looked into her eyes. "Yes," he said. "I feel very safe."

She smiled. "Sleep now, Spock. Sleep and dream of me. Sleep."

His eyes closed. Ailis stared at his peaceful face. She leaned forward and kissed his forehead; at the same time she began to dissolve until there was nothing but a web shot through with light, beautifully coloured, touching Spock at the forehead.

Jim Kirk materialised in the marble hall. Clutching his phaser he looked around and saw the door Ailis had taken Spock through. It led him into a gloomy corridor seemingly carved out of rock. he could see a light glowing at the end of it. Following the light he came to the entrance of a cave, where he stopped in horror.

He saw Spock prone on the ground, with Ailis covering him. The word 'incubus' flashed into his mind. As Ailis became aware of Kirk she floated free of Spock's lifeless figure. Kirk raised his phaser to fire, and she turned into a beautiful woman.

Momentarily stunned, Kirk hesitated, and was struck down by incredible pain. His phaser clattered to the ground as he fell. Dimly he saw the cloud of light settle again over Spock. The pain was so great Kirk knew he was about to pass out, but against all the odds his hand closed over his phaser.

He gasped, "Ailis!"

Again the cloud floated off Spock, and as it did so Kirk fired, blasting Ailis into oblivion.

He came round some time later in Sickbay, and was overjoyed to see Spock regarding him from the next bed.

"Spock!"

The Vulcan's eyes crinkled slightly at the corners, the only indication that Spock was pleased to see him - that, and his tone of voice as he said, "Captain, it is good to see you."

At the sound of their voices McCoy came into the room. "Jim, you're awake. How do you feel?"

"I feel good, Bones," said Kirk, starting to get up.

McCoy pushed him back down. "Christine!" he shouted.

Nurse Chapel came in laden with a tray of what looked to Kirk like instruments of torture. he groaned.

"Just a few tests to run," said McCoy, barely refraining from rubbing his hands in glee.

Spock raised himself on one elbow and scrutinised the Doctor gravely. "Dr McCoy, one question before you begin."

"Sure, Spock," replied McCoy, certain of his ground. "Fire away."

"On the planet you were extremely ill. At one point I thought you dead, and performed a funeral service for you."

McCoy and Kirk stared at him. "That would explain your shirt, Spock," said Kirk slowly.

McCoy looked puzzled as Spock nodded. "So tell me, Doctor," he continued, "who performed these diagnostic tests on you when you recovered?"

McCoy stared at him. Kirk started to grin. "He's got a point, Bones. Come on, man, answer his question."

McCoy opened and shut his mouth

several times, then he said bitterly, "Damn! How does he always manage to do this to me? Jim," he turned to Kirk, "I appeal to you."

"I'm afraid you don't, Bones," grinned Kirk. "You're not my type."

Nurse Chapel giggled.

"Seriously, Bones," said Kirk, "have you any real reason for not pronouncing Spock and me fit for duty?"

McCoy looked at him. "I feel these tests would show -"

Kirk interrupted him. "Bones!"

McCoy sighed. "I guess... well, not

as such..."

Kirk smiled. "Then I would like to invite you and Spock to my quarters for an informal de-briefing session."

As Spock climbed off his bed McCoy stared at them both with narrowed eyes, his hands on his hips.

"Wait just a damn minute, Jim. As Ship's Surgeon, I'm imposing one condition."

Spock and Kirk exchanged glances.

"Which is?" Kirk asked warily.

McCoy grinned from ear to ear.

"Make mine a mint julep!"



GOODNIGHT, SWEETHEART

If our two lives count but as grains of sand upon the beach of time,
Surely it was not so that night, my love.
We walked together through the friendly dark,
While a band played 'Goodnight, Sweetheart' to a smiling moon.

We laughed and counted stars together;
A dream for you, to me reality.
I held you close,
Drunk on the scent and touch and taste of you;
I held you close and knew
I held both time and happiness in my hands.

And then I let you die.

Time runs in river-swirls and patterns, it is said,
So we shall meet again,
When our two souls will laugh, and count the stars together,
And hold each other close,
Drunk in the knowledge of eternal love
Holding both time and happiness in our hands.

But until then... Goodnight, Sweetheart.

Sue Jones



THE TALES OF MONTGOMERY SCOTT NO 1

SCOTT'S LAW

by Alan Boag

"Bridge to Engineering."

Without pausing in his work Scott muttered an acknowledgement into the communications console by his desk.

"Aye?"

"A sub-space message has just come in for you, Mr Scott," said Uhura. "It's coded Private and Confidential. The point of origin is Planet Six of the Star System Phi. Shall I copy it to your station?"

"Aye, do that. Thanks"

* * * * *

"What are you looking so happy about, Scotty?" asked Kirk as he joined the Engineer in the Officers' Mess.

"It must have been something in that sub-space message that came through in mid-watch," said McCoy. "What was in it? You've been like a cat with two tails ever since it came in."

"Yes, Scotty, let us all in on it," said Kirk. "Why are you so pleased with yourself? Even Mr Spock is bursting with curiosity."

"It would not be logical of me to burst with anything, Captain," commented the Vulcan calmly, "but it would be equally illogical for Mr Scott to keep from us the reason for his good humour."

Scott's grin widened even further as he looked from man to man before he replied, "It was a message from Aurelia on Planet Six of Star System Phi. You'll

remember the Star System Phi?"

Kirk groaned, "I don't think I'm likely to forget the Phi System in a hurry," he answered with feeling. "That was a traumatic experience for all of us."

"Aye, well, you'll mind then how I was left stranded on Planet Six while you and the rest of the crew were trapped in limbo combating the Dreaded Bug-blower Beast of Traal? And how I had to single-handedly repair the life support and communications system for the entire planet? Well, single-handed apart from Aurelia, that is."

"Yes, Scotty," sighed McCoy wearily. "We've heard the story a million times by now. How you tracked down the fault and needed someone with an understanding of particle physics who could use a sonic screwdriver and who was at the same time small enough to crawl through the air ducts to the seat of the problem and carry out the repair. And how you searched the whole planet but there was no-one small enough who was old enough to have learned the theory or the practice."

"Aye, not until I found Aurelia." Scott nodded excitedly.

"Ye'll ken that girls arnae taught science or engineering on VI, she had to educate herself in secret using her father's files and hacking unauthorised access to his computer. It was nothing short of a miracle that I found her. Or that she found me I should say."

"Yes, yes we know all that. So what's happened now?" asked Kirk

impatiently. "What did the message say?"

"Well, Aurelia has just sent me a message to tell me that as a result of that wee escapade and because of the chewing out I gave the Planetary High Council about the absurdity of assuming that females couldnae understand science and engineering, they have repealed the law banning women from studying the subjects and Aurelia has been accepted into their Academy to study for an Advanced Degree in Particle Physics and Sub-space Engineering. The first female in their history and the youngest student for three generations. Is that no' great?"

"It's wonderful, Scotty" agreed Kirk, "but there's more, isn't there? There's something else."

"Aye, Captain. Do ye no' see what this means?" Scott laughed at the puzzled look on the faces of Kirk and McCoy and at Spock's slightly raised eyebrow. Savouring the moment he paused before completing the tale.

"Captain," he said at last, "I've finally done it. I've said often enough that it couldna be done and now I've gone and done it. I've changed the laws of Phi Six."



Limericks

by Alan Boag

ONE

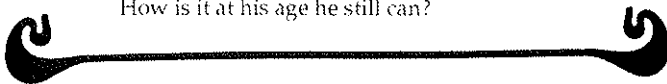
Said a bold Starship Captain named Kirk
 "Attention I never will shirk.
 I'll be nice, I'll be mean,
 I will steal every scene,
 While somebody else does the work."

TWO

In Engineering Montgomery Scott
 Was hatching a devious plot.
 It involved good malt whisky,
 And young maidens frisky,
 And Scotty to beam up the lot.

THREE

Said Spock, the so logical Vulcan,
 In tones that were gentle and silken,
 "Kirk's prowess I ponder,
 His stunts make me wonder,
 How is it at his age he still can?"



ΕΠΙΛΟΓΗ

Enterprise on routine mission,
Starfleet orders well defined.
Had to leave that fateful planet,
Had to leave her far behind.
Kirk in centre chair, as always,
Eyes on viewscreen, stars ahead,
Heart still in the nineteen-thirties,
Words unspoken, tears unshed.
Crew concerned at Kirk's behaviour,
So withdrawn, preoccupied.
Hadn't talked of recent sorrow,
Hadn't faced it, hadn't tried.
Hadn't slept in peace for ages,
Not since Edith Keeler died.

Headed to his quarters, weary,
Heard a distant loud commotion.
Knew the cause before he reached it,
Logic fighting raw emotion.
Cries of "Pointy-eared hobgoblin!"
Comments on "Witchdoctor care."
Cool response to heated insult,
Eyebrows raised at angry glare.
Got involved despite intentions
In this Vulcan/Doctor fight,
Knew if he ignored his comrades
Argument could last all night.
If it might annoy the Vulcan
Bones could argue black was white.

Contemplated feuding couple,
Thought of all their hard-fought battles.
Green-skinned pitchforked demon fighting
Quack with leeches, beads and rattles.
Studied them with deep affection,
Could not tell which side was winning,
Could not stop his own reaction,
Glimmer of a smile beginning.
Argument then ceased abruptly,
Both friends knew their fight was done.
Ice-blue eyes met Vulcan's briefly,
Knew why dispute had begun.
Both in rare complete agreement,
Jim was smiling - *both* had won.



Mrs. Pippin

"THERE WILL BE DANCING..."

by

Sheila Clark

The face of Admiral Fitzgerald winked off the viewscreen, leaving Kirk staring at it blankly, his eyes still seeing the afterimage of the face shadowing the screen. His bridge crew was hardly less horrified.

Sure, they'd known they were due an inspection... but they'd expected it to be made by Fitzgerald himself, or just possibly Komack, both of whom were totally predictable; any crew could get top rating from either one provided certain things were up to the standard they demanded. 95% of Fitzgerald's inspections were always in the engineroom (he had been a Chief Engineer himself), which Scott demanded ran at 150% efficiency at all times; Komack always delved deep into the navigational records (he had started his career as a navigator), checked the Captain's Log, and gave everything else a very superficial scan.

But Admiral Sobieski, already on his way and due to arrive in forty eight hours, was a complete unknown, newly promoted and in all probability keen to show his mettle.

Kirk returned to a slow awareness of his surroundings, his mind already considering ways and means of 'softening up' the Admiral and making the inspection less of an ordeal. Oh, Kirk had no doubt that his crew would get a good report, no matter what, but there was no point in letting the inspection be more nerve-racking than was absolutely necessary.

Something to give the Enterprise a

good first impression in the Admiral's eyes...

Sobieski... Poles were usually very nationalistic - worse even than Chekov! Yes - if they gave the Admiral a dinner-dance on Polish lines? No, on second thoughts, just a dinner. Nobody - except perhaps Chekov - could possibly manage the steps of Polish dancing.

He glanced round. "Uhura - tell Mr Scott to meet me in the briefing room in ten minutes. Dr McCoy, too. Spock, come with me. Mr Sulu, you have the con."

"...and so it seems to me, gentlemen, that the... er... the logical thing to do is to greet the Admiral in such a way that it will give him a good opinion of the Enterprise before he even begins his inspection. You know what some of those brass hats, especially the newly-promoted ones, can be like; give a ship, a crew, an officer, a good reputation, and they're determined to find some fault, some way to 'knock them down to size'. So I thought, if we were to lay on a traditional Polish dinner for him - "

"Beggin' your pardon, Captain, but that'll no' work," Scott interrupted.

"It won't?" Kirk looked startled. "I thought the Poles were pretty patriotic?"

"Aye, sir - but if you want to impress Charlie Sobieski, you'll lay on a Scottish dinner - aye, an' dress a'body in kilts - the men, that is; long white dresses for the lassies - with a tartan sash worn

plaid-style."

"Scottish? But -"

Scott grinned slightly at the confusion on his Captain's face. "Captain, I knew Charlie when he was a raw Lieutenant aboard the Constitution. He's obsessed wi' things Scottish - well, bein' of the family he is, that's hardly surprising, mark you."

"Sobieski? Scottish?"

Scott's grin widened. "It dates back to the 1700s. Back then there was a lot o' religious... well, let's be charitable and call it *controversy*. The English of the time didn't want a ruler who was a Roman Catholic, but the Stuart Kings *were* Catholics. To cut a long story short, the English eventually deposed the Stuart King in favour of his daughters, and exiled him and his baby son; then when the daughters died the throne went to the nearest Protestant relative, who happened to be German.

"The Stuarts tried to get the throne back in 1715 but the rising didn't get very far and the young prince went back to France. He married a Clemintina Sobieska, and they had two sons - Charles, who led another uprising in 1745, and Henry, who became a priest - and of course, priests didn't marry.

"The '45 was no more successful than the '15 had been, and at the tail end o' the day, Prince Charlie also returned to France. He had a daughter, but she died childless. As far as a'boddy was concerned, the direct Stuart line had died out.

"Then these two jokers appeared - brothers, the older one calling himself the 'Duc D'Albanie'. They were the sons of a Thomas Allen, who claimed to be the illegitimate son of Prince Charles. They

even used the name Stuart; and they maintained that John Sobieski Stuart was the rightful heir to the British throne. When John died, his brother Charles took the title Duc D'Albanie. Nobody paid much attention to them, but that didn't discourage them - or their descendants.

"Somewhere along the line they went back to using the name Sobieski, and this one claims direct descent from the Charles who was Thomas Allen's son. They seem resigned to nobody ever taking their claim seriously, but they still maintain they're Scottish, no' Polish, by descent."

Spock's eyebrows had almost vanished under his fringe. "Surely they should have known that the offspring of an illegitimate child has no legal claim..."

"Some people will do anything to look important, Spock," Kirk said. "Some Humans, that is."

"Aye," Scott agreed. "And they lived in an era when flamboyant claims were often accepted - at least by enough of the bored rich to ensure that those making them would live and dine well off invitations designed to show off to the world 'The Important People I Know.'"

Kirk brought the subject back to the present. "Well, if you're quite sure that this Sobieski is one of that family and proud of his 'Scots ancestry', we'll set up a Scottish meal," he agreed. "What about dress? Kilts, you said, Scotty?"

"The computer is fully programmed to provide Highland Dress," Scott boasted. "All we need do is tell it which tartan we want - in view of the occasion, I'd suggest Dress Stuart for everyone who doesn't have a tartan - and it'll get the fabricators to turn out everything we need."

Kirk grunted. "Right, Scotty. What about food?"

The Chief Engineer thought for a moment. "Cock-a-leekie soup, followed by salmon, then venison with cranberry sauce, and cloutie dumpling as sweet," he suggested. "Charlie likes cloutie dumpling."

"What is it?" McCoy asked.

"It's... it's just a cloutie dumpling," Scotty said uninformatively.

"That doesn't tell us anything, Mr Scott," Spock said patiently.

"It's a mixture of flour, suet, spices, fruit, all boiled together in a well-floured cloth," Scott said after a moment's thought. "The food processors can produce all of that wi' no bother. Wine? Birch sap wine."

"*Birch sap wine*?" McCoy managed.

"Aye. It's got a tang to it that none o' your grape wines'll ever have." Scott's voice caressed the description. "There's a winery near Inverness that's made it for over three hundred years... We'll have to settle for what the food processors can give us, of course, but I programmed birch sap wine in myself. And of course we'll need to have plenty of whisky. Charlie likes a good malt."

"All right," Kirk said finally. "The senior officers will dine with the Admiral, of course - Scotty, are there any Scottish vegetarian dishes that Spock can eat?"

Scott looked slightly doubtful. "Not really. There's porridge, of course, but that's hardly food for a dinner."

"Then we'll just have to have a Vulcan menu for him, but I'm sure the Admiral will understand about that.

After dinner we'll adjourn to the main rec room and join the crew - at least for an hour or so; give him a chance to meet them before the inspection. By then, with luck, he'll be tired and want to get himself off to bed."

"If he disna'," Scotty promised, "I'll take charge of him and keep him amused. I always got on fine wi' him."

On returning to his cabin the following night, Kirk found his First Officer already there, having entered through the adjoining bathroom. A neat pile of clothes, topped by an uncomfortably fancy-frilled shirt, sat on a chair; Spock was turning over, with considerable dubiety, the newly-processed clothes Kirk's yeoman had laid out on his bed.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Scared they won't fit?"

"Jim - Mr Scott said the fabricators would produce everything that we would require... didn't he?"

"Yes."

"There are no... er... undergarments."

"No - ?" Startled, Kirk joined the Vulcan and began to turn over the clothes. He had just lifted his shirt, wondering if he would ever find the nerve to wear anything that frilly, when there came a buzz at the door - a buzz which even the imperturbable Spock was prepared to concede sounded agitated.

The door slid open before Kirk had a chance to speak; having used his voice override, taking full advantage of his position both as CMO and as Kirk's friend, McCoy erupted into the room, his

arms full of tartan, velvet, silk and simulated goatskin, and an expression of near panic on his face.

Kirk and Spock looked at each other.

"Bones?"

"I won't do it. I won't *do* it!"

"Won't do what? Bones?"

"Wear this... this... Jim - there aren't any underpants!" He dumped the offending costume onto another chair.

"Perhaps a word with Mr Scott?" Kirk suggested.

McCoy glanced from one to the other, taking in the clothes sitting on the chair behind the desk. "You'd already found out?"

Kirk nodded as he punched the intercom. "Mr Scott, report to me in my quarters immediately."

Scott's eye fell on the tartan the moment he entered the cabin, and he beamed. "They look well, don't they?"

"Yes, I suppose so," Kirk said doubtfully. "But Scotty - what about underpants? You said -"

"Underpants?" Scott exclaimed, horror in his voice. "Underpants? You canna' throw a party for Admiral Sobieski and turn up improperly dressed, mon! He'd be black affronted!"

All three stared at him with varying degrees of shock. Even Spock's normally rigid control was inadequate to cover his surprise. "Improperly dressed?" Kirk whispered.

"Aye. Oh, I doubt Charlie'll come wi' a mirror - he doesna' know we're putting on a Scots night - but he'd be sure to -"

"A mirror?" Kirk asked blankly.

"When Highland regiments were inspected, the officer'd have a mirror on a stick so he could see up the kilts. Or sometimes the whole regiment would just be given the order 'Up kilts!' - and woe betide any man found wearing pants!"

McCoy's face was a study in stunned horror. Spock had managed to regain control of his facial muscles and now listened apparently impassively; but there was a certain rigidity about his expression that bespoke Vulcan Control being Exercised, rather than his normally relaxed expressionlessness. Kirk looked slightly stunned. He was trying to visualise himself giving such an order, and failing hopelessly.

The buzzer sounded again, and Kirk pulled himself together sufficiently to call, "Come!"

As the door opened, both Sulu and Chekov stepped forward, each intending to enter first. Predictably, they impeded each other, and there was a brief altercation before they managed to push through the door.

"Sir -" they began in unison.

Kirk sighed. "Don't tell me - the clothes for tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," Sulu said, glad of Kirk's perspicacity, then, seeing the three Highland costumes and taking in the expression on McCoy's face, he realised that Kirk had not, after all, suddenly developed second sight.

Scott looked round at the five faces.

"You canna - you just *canna* - wear underpants with a kilt!" he insisted. He looked as horrified at the mere suggestion as McCoy did at the idea that their nether parts should be as bare as the suggestion.

"Scotty, who would know if we did?" Kirk asked reasonably.

"Charlie's quite likely to ask you if you're properly dressed."

"It sounds like we're expected to be properly *undressed*," Chekov muttered to Sulu. Realising that he wasn't intended to overhear the comment, Kirk ignored it.

"We could easily tell him we were," McCoy said desperately. "I mean, I for one wouldn't feel properly dressed if I was half naked."

"And if he asks you outright - 'Are you properly dressed, or are you wearing anything under the kilt?' - would you tell a lie?" Scott demanded.

"Oh, God!"

"I, for one, would not," Spock said evenly. "Captain, I hereby volunteer to remain on duty tomorrow night."

"Oh no you don't, Spock. If you think you're going to abandon the rest of us to the... the man-eating haggises while you sit comfortably on the bridge, you can think again! Scotty - isn't there any way out?" Inspired - "What about tartan trousers?"

"Trews?" Scott looked doubtful. "I don't say that nobody wore trews back in the days of the '45; on occasion, some of the clan chiefs probably did..." He scowled thoughtfully, shaking his head.

"One moment, Mr Scott," Spock put in. "Surely it was the inhabitants of the Highland areas who wore kilts. Those

who lived in the Lowland part of the country wore breeches."

McCoy looked suddenly hopeful.

"Aye," Scott agreed, "but it was the Highlanders supported the Jacobite cause." He shook his head. "Charlie has a... a romantic attachment to what he thinks is proper Highland dress."

"What he *thinks* is proper Highland dress?" Kirk repeated half accusingly.

"The philabeg. The short kilt. It was beginning to be worn before the Jacobite Uprisings, but -"

"The *short* kilt?" McCoy interrupted.

"Originally, the kilt was a strip of cloth six foot wide by fourteen foot long," Scott explained patiently. "You put a belt on the ground, put the pleated cloth down on top of it, lay down, wrapped it round yourself and fastened the belt. The extra length was wrapped round your shoulders."

McCoy looked even more horror-stricken - if that were possible.

"A very practical garment," Scott added. "It was clothes, blanket, even tent, all in one."

"That's all very well," Kirk put in, "but it doesn't solve our current problem."

"Oh." Scott gazed once more round the circle of recalcitrant faces; inspiration dawned. "There is one way..." he said slowly. "You mightn't like it much, but it's the only way you'll be able to justify wearing underpants." He spoke the word as if it had a nasty taste.

"Well?" Kirk demanded.

"Gentlemen - there will be dancing

tomorrow night."

"Of course there'll be dancing!" Kirk exclaimed.

"No, no, Captain, not that kind of dancing. *Highland* dancing!" He glanced round the circle. "Six of us... We'll need at least two more. Let's see. There's young Cameron in Engineering, he'll do fine... Aye, and Meengus from Life Support."

Kirk looked puzzled. "Meengus? Who's that?"

"The red-headed lieutenant in charge of the third watch."

"I thought his name was Menzies."

"Sassenachs!" Scott muttered disgustedly. "It's *spelled* M-e-n-z-i-e-s, but it's *pronounced* Meengus. The Z is silent... though it's really only in names that you usually find the traditional pronunciation," he added gloomily.

He looked at them. "Of course, it's possible that Charlie will want to join in - and if he does, he'll expect a partner to suit his rank."

"It'll need to be Uhura, then," Kirk said. "She's the highest-ranked woman on board. I'll warn her -"

"Woman?" Scott managed, his expression that of a man whose house has been set on fire by lightning and who knows that the fire brigade will be prevented from arriving because the storm has also washed away the bridge. "Woman? Highland dancing's for *men*! It'll be bad enough that only three of us'll know the steps properly - though I trust Mr Spock's memory, and between the four of us we should be able to keep the rest of you right. But if Charlie does want to join in, he'll expect to partner the

Captain."

Kirk shoved his jaw back into place. Spock, however, was nodding understandingly. "I see," he said. "Vulcan also has several traditional dances that are customarily performed only by males. They date from preReform times, when men in camp who were feeling energetic wanted exercise but who, for whatever reason, considered an expedition away from camp foolhardy. It was also a matter for pride for tired men to join in, in order to pretend that no matter how arduous a day they had had, they were still fresher than was in fact the case."

McCoy was looking more and more apoplectic. "Dammit, I enjoy a dance as much as the next man, but I've seen some of your Highland dancing, Scotty. I couldn't do that to save my life!"

"Doctor - you either wear underpants - to spare the blushes of the ladies - and dance, or you don't wear underpants. It's your choice."

He crossed to the computer. "Well, gentlemen?"

"We'll dance," Kirk said gloomily. "But Scotty - if the Admiral wants to dance, *you* partner him - because a) you know him, b) it'd give him a partner who knows the dances, and c) it gives Bones an out. Spock and I will go together, and Sulu and Chekov can go with - who was it? Cameron and... Meengus?" He hesitated. "The rest of the men in the crew will just have to put up with it - I don't suppose it'll be possible to teach everyone on board the steps of your dances."

"We'll only need two," Scott said thoughtfully. "A foursome reel - that can be Cameron, Meengus, Mr Spock and me - then we split up, each takes another

partner, and do an eightsome reel. Part of the entertainment for the Admiral." He punched an instruction into the computer, and the fabricator coughed out a pair of underpants.

"It did that very neatly for a garment you said we couldn't wear." McCoy's voice was very suspicious.

"I just keyed in the information 'there will be dancing'," Scott told him. "The computer is fully programmed; it knew the requirements."

Kirk was looking thoughtful. "Scotty - you said 'entertainment for the Admiral' - we'd better have more than ten minutes of dancing, hadn't we?"

"Captain, what I said was *part* of the entertainment - and a foursome and an eightsome will take nearer half an hour than ten minutes. As well as the dancing, I can give a selection of Jacobite songs on the pipes, and Cameron has a good voice - he was a Mod gold medallist the year before he joined Starfleet. He can sing a couple of Gaelic songs. Then Meengus, while he's not up to Cameron's standard, has a pleasant enough voice and a good repertoire of bothy ballads. Aye, I know they're Lowland songs, but they'll do for a general entertainment." He thought for a moment. "Kyle's a good conjurer, so we can get him to fill in five minutes, and we can get Uhura to sing - if she doesn't already know any songs, she can learn a couple before tomorrow night. Come to think of it, she knows Charlie Is My Darling already. Then the Skye Boat Song is one of the easier ones to learn - and Charlie likes it - and there's The Dark Island - it's one of his favourites, and that's three good tunes. I'll have a word with everyone." He looked round them, beaming again. "I'd suggest we all get together in one of the briefing rooms in an hour to go over the steps of the dances.

It'll be more private there."

Scott looked round the assembled men. Spock looked as imperturbable as usual, Kirk had the fixed expression of a man faced with a challenge he is determined to overcome but would rather not face if he was given any choice in the matter; Sulu and Chekov both looked resigned, and McCoy wore an expression similar to the one that must have been worn by martyrs going to execution. Cameron and Menzies looked fractionally nervous; they normally had nothing whatsoever to do with the bridge crew, and while they were both perfectly confident that the departments they were in were just as important as the bridge, they did feel a certain amount of trepidation at meeting their senior officers in what amounted to a socialising situation. They were both very grateful that they had been assigned to partner the senior helmsman and navigator rather than the Captain and First Officer.

"Basically, there are only two steps that you need to know," Scott began. "A travelling step and what is called a 'setting step', that sort of marks time. Both work to a system of one, two, three, hop. This is the setting step. Step onto the right foot; then the left foot, then the right again, all on the spot, then kick with the left foot out towards ten o'clock, so - " he demonstrated. "Then you do left, right, left, kick." He nodded to Cameron, who switched on a music tape, then swung into a brisk demonstration. "Join in when you think you've got the hang of it."

Spock joined in almost immediately; Kirk watched for a few seconds longer, then also started, hesitantly at first then with increasing confidence. Chekov joined in next, then Sulu. Finally McCoy made a stumbling attempt, confused his feet, tripped, and was only saved from

falling by the alert Spock, who somehow had managed to attend to what the others were doing as well as concentrating on the steps he was learning.

McCoy took a deep breath, then doggedly began to work at the steps again.

Scott let them work at the setting step for some minutes, by which time McCoy was at least managing to keep his feet in some sort of time, then stopped them. "Right, gentlemen - now for the travelling step. It's similar, but this time you're moving in a straight line. Slide your right foot forward, bring the left foot up behind it to touch it, slide the right foot forward again, then hop, bringing the left foot past the right foot as you do; then slide the left foot forward, right foot forward to touch it, left foot forward, then hop and bring the right foot forward again." He began to move round the room in time to the music. Spock joined him within seconds, then Kirk. The others joined in a few moments later. This time McCoy managed not too badly. Again Scott let them practise for a minute, then he stopped them.

"Right, gentlemen; now you know the two basic steps. It's time to learn the dances." He smiled slightly at the nervous expression on McCoy's face. "It's all right, Doctor - these are simple dances, repetitive; you don't have to worry having to learn a lot of complicated patterns."

McCoy looked unconvinced as they arranged themselves into a rough circle. Scott explained the basic pattern of the dance, saying, "Everything goes in eights; if you keep on counting to yourself in eights, you won't go wrong in the timing." The Doctor wished he could be as confident.

Scott walked them through the first

part of the dance. Circle in one direction for eight beats, then back again. A sort of cartwheel movement next, each pair with the right-hand partner towards the middle, then turn and back to the original position with the left-hand partner towards the middle. Into position again, set and turn partner; then a sort of chain movement, with the right hand partners all going in one direction, and the left hand partners in the other, until they were all back in their original positions.

Scott made them walk through it twice before he started the tape and allowed them to try dancing it.

Spock, as always, picked up the steps quickly, and had no difficulty in keeping in time. Kirk was almost as good. Chekov, whose native dances were far more complicated, quickly discovered that he was enjoying himself; Sulu concentrated doggedly on his timing, counting steadily as he went. McCoy, however, was having decided difficulties.

He found it surprisingly easy to get confused in the chain, trying to start off with the wrong hand, and the others had to pull him into position several times. They went over it several times, then Scott decided to move on to the next part of the dance.

This part was very repetitive. Each dancer in turn went into the middle of the circle, the others danced round and back, then the one in the middle set first to his own partner then to one of the opposite men, then danced another chain; then the others circled him again, he set to one of the pair to each side of his position and chained again, returned to his place and someone else took his place. The learners were told to stick to the basic movement, while Scott, Cameron and Menzies, when they danced together, performed somewhat more complicated steps than the basic ones.

"Can you do that?" Kirk asked at one point after the three men had spent the entire portion of their turn doing three different and complicated steps. "Use a step nobody else has used?"

Scott nodded. "Wait till you see us doing the foursome reel," he said cheerfully. "Dancers doing a foursome can do any step they want, and it's no' unknown for all four to be doing a different setting step at the same time."

Eventually Scott moved them on to the third part of the dance, which - to McCoy's relief - turned out to be a repeat of the first part.

They spent some time going over the dance. Finally, Kirk decided that apart from Spock, who still had to learn the other dance, they had had enough for one session. He fixed a time for them to meet again later that day, then carried McCoy, Chekov and Sulu off with him, leaving the remaining four to go over the other dance.

Scott insisted that the party who gathered in the transporter room to greet the Admiral should wear Highland costume, and when Sobieski beamed aboard, Kirk realised that Scott had been right. Like Scott, Sobieski wore a kilt with a uniform dress jacket, and the Admiral's eyes lit up at sight of the tartan-filled transporter room.

Kirk introduced his senior officers. Sobieski's eyes lit up again at sight of Scott. "Scotty!" he exclaimed, and they could hear the Scottish accent thick in his voice. "It's been a long time."

"Aye, it has, Admiral." Scott was too well-disciplined to relax formality here, no matter what he might do in the privacy of his quarters later, over a dram

of good malt.

As Kirk had known, it was too late for the Admiral to begin his general inspection that day, although he could, and would, check the Captain's official log and duplicate returns. The check was relatively perfunctory - far more so than Kirk would have expected; it was only later that he realised just how much he had to thank Scott for. Admiral Sobieski knew Scott of old; they all knew that. They just had not realised how well. Sobieski knew that Scott would never remain aboard a ship that was less than totally efficiently captained. That he had remained aboard so long told Sobieski that Scott approved of Kirk. It was all he needed to know.

The evening started off well, too. The meal was a great success. Sobieski accepting without demur Spock's alternate menu although he shook a slightly sympathetic head over the Vulcan's inability to appreciate good salmon and venison. His eyes lit up at the dumpling, and Kirk felt impelled to give Scott the credit, with a casual, "Mr Scott said you like dumpling." The admission, had he but known, did him no disservice in the Admiral's eyes: Sobieski was a man who appreciated honesty and had little time for the senior officer who failed to give his underlings full credit for what they did.

They had decided that the 'entertainment' should come as soon after the meal as possible. It began with Uhura, whose voice was undoubtedly the best on the ship, and who had either learned or already knew not only the songs suggested by Scott but a couple of others as well. Then Scott played his pipe selection, Menzies sang a bothy ballad, Kyle showed his skill as a conjurer and Cameron sang three Gaelic songs. Finally came the dancing.

The four who were to do the foursome reel took their places, and Uhura started the tape - for the occasion, they had realised that although it would be better if Scott played the pipes, his expertise as a dancer was more needed.

Watching closely, Kirk quickly realised that this dance was fairly simple, being a sixteen-bar repetition of a chain followed by the men setting to each other in pairs. But the setting! Spock had clearly benefitted from his session the previous evening, for he too was performing something more complicated than the basic step Scott had taught them.

When the dance finished, the four men broke up and Kirk nodded to Sulu, Chekov and McCoy. They moved forward and took their places with the others in the new formation.

There was a fixed expression on McCoy's face as they danced. They managed with only one very minor problem when McCoy tried to turn in the wrong direction, but Scott was watching him closely and pulled him into the right position before any harm was done.

When the dance finished, Kirk breathed a silent sigh of relief. This was the moment when the Admiral might signal his wish to join in, and then - with the exception of McCoy - they would have to go through the dance again. Sobieski, however, gave no indication that he wanted to dance, and it was with some relief that the men left the dance floor and rejoined the Admiral where he sat beside Uhura - Kirk had decided that she was an obvious person to help entertain the Admiral.

"Well danced, Captain," Sobieski complimented him when Kirk returned to his seat. "How many of the set are Scots?"

"Just three," Kirk said. "The rest of

us have been taking lessons from Mr Scott." No need to say just how recent those lessons were.

Sobieski nodded. "He's taught you well."

McCoy glanced at him, suspecting him of a degree of sarcasm, but he appeared to be genuinely complimentary.

"What about the rest of the crew?" Sobieski went on.

Kirk shook his head. "No - not yet, anyway. Apart from Cameron and Meengus, the rest of us are senior bridge crew, even though Chekov is still an ensign. We didn't want to - well - possibly inhibit the rest of the crew by having them mixing with their senior officers in what is essentially a recreational activity." He decided not to add that it would have been too damn difficult to teach the entire crew from scratch in two days, anyway.

Sobieski nodded. "A wise decision."

Uhura now put on a tape of standard music, and Sobieski watched the crewmembers pair off and begin the more sedate and general dancing that most Federation members favoured. She rejoined the senior officers as McCoy, who felt that he had now done more than his share of keeping the Admiral sweet, took over from her.

Admiral Sobieski stood as she joined them. "Miss Uhura, would you care to dance?"

"Thank you, Admiral."

The men watched as the Sobieski led Uhura onto the floor.

It was immediately obvious that the Admiral had very little sense of rhythm.

He tried, but both left feet kept getting in each other's way. That he managed for a time without tripping both himself and his partner was evidence of Uhura's skill. But not even Uhura could continue to avoid accident indefinitely - not with a partner as clumsy as Sobieski. Disregarding the near-disasters he had already experienced, the Admiral tried to swing Uhura into a complicated move, probably encouraged by the simple fact that he had not already tripped. She made a valiant effort to follow him, but with a partner who was not sure himself exactly what he wanted to do, it was impossible. She was already off balance when he stumbled over his own feet, and they went down in an untidy heap.

Kirk rushed to help the Admiral to his feet, aware of something - at that moment he was not sure just what it was - that seemed wrong...

Uhura stammered an apology as she and her partner regained their feet, but Sobieski brushed it aside. "No, no, my dear," he said. "It was entirely my fault. You are such a good dancer that I forgot my own limitations, and tried to do something I've always wanted to attempt but never had the courage to try until now."

He continued speaking, but Kirk was aware of Sobieski's voice only as background noise when he caught sight of Scott's face. The engineer was looking as stunned, as horrified, as he had done when the crew originally objected to wearing these kilts without the...

Underpants! Sobieski couldn't dance - how come Scotty, who knew him, didn't know that? - but he was wearing underpants - they had been obvious when the kilt flew up as he fell; and Scott had assured them that that could only be done if 'there was to be dancing - Highland

dancing'. Sobieski had cheated!

The rest of the inspection was practically a formality. Sobieski left, clearly delighted with the Enterprise and her crew, and Kirk mentally added another Admiral to the list of those whose inspections need not be feared.

Scott looked round at his fellow officers with an expression of satisfaction. "That went off very well," he commented. He had clearly decided to ignore Sobieski's departure from 'proper dress'.

McCoy had other ideas. "Scotty."

"Aye, Doctor?"

"If we turned up improperly dressed, the Admiral would be 'black affronted' - I think that was what you said?"

"Well, aye," Scott admitted. "But you must admit, Doctor, that if he'd been properly dressed when he tripped, he'd have embarrassed the ladies. If he's that bad a dancer, that's probably why."

"Since he's that bad a dancer, he should know better than to try," Uhura commented acidly. "My legs are still all bruised where he kicked them." She glanced at McCoy. "Even Dr McCoy is a better dancer than the Admiral - and up to now I'd have said he was the worst dancer in Starfleet," she finished frankly. "He gives a perfect example of how not to dance."

Kirk grinned at McCoy. "Bones - isn't it nice to know that you're not the worst dancer in Starfleet? Even though you give a perfect example of how not to dance?"

McCoy shrugged. "Oh, nobody's

perfect," he replied airily. "There's always someone else better - even at doing badly!"

And on that, he walked out.



DEBATE OF PEACE

My heart yearns for the time
when I shall live in peace at last,
when fears that I had
Have been buried in the past.

How long must I wait
and endure this torment?
How can I answer the call of a world
on which time is all I have spent?

I know someday I must return,
so the emotions that now burn
Are stilled and blanketed
from my mind.
But how will I bear to think
Of the Humans I leave behind?

My Thy'la - my brother -
whose emotions I know and understand,
whose thoughts I have sifted through
like flowing grains of sand.

I shall learn a new way,
and at last earn peace.
The confusion will be buried
and the misgivings shall cease.

When I am torn apart they shall find
only friendship and love
inscribed on my mind.

Rachel Lindfield



THE CLOROS CRISIS

by

Fiona Fletcher

"Captain's Log, Stardate 2347.1

verbal slight.

"The Enterprise has been recalled from routine patrol of the Romulan Neutral Zone. We are ordered to proceed immediately to Cloros IV, to offer the colonists emergency medical assistance as a mystery virus continues to decimate the population."

Spock raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to retaliate as Kirk cut in.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Perhaps you could show us the location of Cloros IV on the viewscreen, Mr Spock, and we can finally get this briefing under way?"

As usual Kirk was the first to arrive in the Briefing Room, which immediately clicked and whirred into life as the automatic sensors detected his presence. Predictably, Spock was the next to arrive, followed by the other senior officers and eventually McCoy. Kirk stopped drumming his fingers on the table as his Chief Medical Officer finally arrived, and resisted the temptation to check the clock yet again.

"Cloros IV," the Vulcan began, "a frontier planet on the outermost quadrant of Ursa Major, has been colonised for some 3.27 Earth years. A Class M planet, it has two moons, one very large land mass, an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, and an average temperature slightly above Earth-normal. It has -"

Kirk cut in for the second time that morning. "That's very interesting, Mr Spock, but our first concern must be the medical situation. Can you give us an update on the current status?"

It was Spock who spoke first. "Since Dr McCoy has, after all, decided to join us, I will, as per Captain Kirk's instructions, begin the briefing session on Cloros IV."

"Hallelujah!" McCoy muttered under his breath.

The Science Officer rose from his chair, walked leisurely across to the main view screen, and switched it on as McCoy took his place at the table.

Uhura, sitting next to him, hastily put her hand up to her mouth to hide a smile.

The Doctor harumphed and cleared his throat. "Perhaps, Mr Spock, you would have preferred that I left Ensign Komota bleeding all over Sickbay with a damaged arm? I decided to show some compassion instead. Not, of course, something you would know very much about." McCoy leaned back in his chair, feeling vindicated against the Vulcan's

Spock chose not to hear the comment, and continued with his narrative. "The first fatality of undetermined cause occurred some 17.4 months ago. Since that time increasing numbers of colonists have succumbed to the same affliction. Symptoms include muscle weakness, loss of balance, eye problems, water retention, swollen limbs and finally, death. Medical personnel on the planet have been unable to isolate the

cause, hence the call for assistance to Starfleet." Spock glanced around the room at the grim faces of the other officers and reclaimed his seat at the table.

Kirk was the first to speak, concern plain in his voice. "How many deaths have there been so far, Mr Spock?"

"Latest figures indicate that a total of 397 fatalities from a population of 3,002 have occurred so far," the Vulcan replied in his usual unruffled manner.

"What about fever, vomiting, or other symptoms such as skin rash?" McCoy wanted to know. "Has anything else been reported?"

Spock steeped his fingers in front of him. "Not to my knowledge, Doctor, but a full medical report is of course available in the computer's data banks."

McCoy did not bother to reply but leaned back in his chair, deep in thought.

"Mr Chekov, how long until we reach Cloros IV?" Kirk asked intently.

"Approximately 72 hours at present speed, Keptin," the young Navigator replied.

"Mr Sulu, see that speed is increased to warp factor 6 on your return to the Bridge," the Captain ordered. "Any further questions?"

The only response was one of silence.

Kirk ordered the meeting adjourned, and one by one the officers files out of the room, returning to their various posts on the ship. Dr McCoy remained behind.

"I don't like it, Jim. The symptoms are unusual, to say the least, and the lack

of fever indicates it probably isn't a virus we're up against; and if it isn't a virus, then it could be anything."

"Come on, Bones!" Kirk replied. "You didn't join Starfleet because you wanted an easy life. Look on it as a challenge - I'm sure you'll get to the bottom of it in no time."

"It's the time part that worries me," the Doctor growled. "People are dying, while I'm expected to come up with some kind of miracle cure at the drop of a hat, and I don't even know where to start."

"Just do your best, Bones, that's all anyone asks or expects." Kirk placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "And besides," he grinned, "you don't wear hats."

Kirk's hair was still slightly damp from his morning shower as the red doors parted with a whoosh and he walked onto the Bridge. After all these years as Captain of the Enterprise the feeling of pride in his ship and his people never seemed to diminish. His sense of satisfaction reflected in his face as he eased himself into the command chair.

Yeoman O'Donnell handed him a steaming cup of coffee and - only after he had taken several mouthfuls - the daily reports requiring his signature. The Captain scanned them briefly and scrawled several almost illegible syllables in the bottom right-hand corner. Satisfied, the Yeoman returned to her other duties.

Kirk leaned back in his chair. "Status report, Mr Spock?"

The Vulcan Science Officer looked up from his scanner and began to give the Captain an update of the current

situation. "We are still on course for Cloros IV, and will arrive in precisely 17.75 hours. We are still too far for direct contact with Governor Jorgensen, but she will be contacted at the first available opportunity." Spock paused. "However, ship's sensors have detected an ion storm in the vicinity of the planet, and we are monitoring the situation closely."

"Will it delay our arrival time?" Kirk wanted to know.

"Negative, Captain," the First Officer replied. "But what may be affected are our communications and use of the transporter when we get there."

"Thank you, Mr Spock. I'll have Scotty prepare the shuttlecraft as a precautionary measure." Kirk flipped the toggle on the arm of his chair. "Bridge to Engineering."

"Scott here," came the brusque and instantaneous reply.

"Scotty, how are things down there?" the Captain asked conversationally.

"Just fine, sir," came the faintly puzzled reply. "Engines are performing at 99.8% efficiency."

Kirk couldn't suppress a grin. "Only 99.8%, Mr Scott? Your standards are beginning to slip."

"Not at all, Captain," he replied indignantly. "I was working on the 0.2% when you buzzed."

"Well perhaps someone else can find a solution to the problem," Kirk responded. "I'd like you to prepare the Galileo and the Copernicus for a possible landing on Cloros IV - and you'd better check with Dr McCoy to see what equipment and supplies he wants to take.

Kirk out."

As ordered, Scott assigned the fine tuning of the third anti-matter intake valve to his second in command and made his way to Sickbay to consult with the Doctor.

The Chief Medical Officer was seated at his computer terminal, running various hypotheses through the electronic brain. He'd read not only the complete medical data on Cloros IV, but just about the whole history of the planet. It was like trying to fit together the pieces of some huge, invisible jigsaw as he tried to find the reason behind the deaths of the colonists.

He stopped reading, got up from his desk, rubbed his eyes and had a good stretch. This was followed by a structured pacing of the small room as he tried to ease the tension out of his cramped body. Something was definitely bothering him. The symptoms were unlike anything he had encountered before, and yet there was something vaguely familiar about them. He kept feeling as though he was missing something, but somehow his memory flatly refused to fill in the blanks.

The computer had been virtually no help at all. The best it could come up with as a suggestion was Talosian flu which, while mildly inconvenient and uncomfortable, was not to McCoy's knowledge ever fatal. More to the point, they were nowhere near Talos, so it was unlikely to be even a mutated strain.

McCoy decided he had been working too hard, walked over to the food synthesiser and programmed himself a cup of coffee. It arrived a few seconds later with a loud beep. He picked up the steaming mug and headed back towards his desk.

He was halfway there when the pain hit him. It felt as though a phaser blast had caught him in the side. The coffee mug shattered on the floor as he instinctively clutched the area of pain, and he doubled up in agony.

It was at precisely that moment that Mr Scott walked into the room. He took in the situation at a glance.

"Dr McCoy!" he gasped. "What on Earth's the matter wi' ye?" and hurried to his friend's side. He grabbed a nearby chair in passing and hastily placed it under the Doctor, who sat down gratefully.

Concern was written all over the Engineer's face as he looked anxiously about the room for Chapel or M'Benga, or any other Sickbay staff, but he was alone with McCoy. He sprinted over to the intercom ready to call for help, but it was McCoy himself who stopped him.

"No, Scotty, don't. I'm fine - it was just a stitch. I've been sitting too long at this blasted terminal is all."

Scott turned round and was relieved to see that the Doctor did indeed look better. The colour had started to return to his face, and he didn't seem to be in quite so much pain, although he made no apparent effort to rise from the chair.

"But Dr McCoy, are ye sure? Ye looked fair terrible just a minute or two ago. It'll no' take long for me to find Dr M'Benga and get him to take a look at ye."

McCoy's voice was stronger this time, and he actually sounded more like his usual self. "Thanks for the concern, but I really am fine. I'll be okay in no time at all."

The Scotsman proved to be insistent. "But I really think ye should get

someone tae see ye."

"Mr Scott! In case you've forgotten, I'm the Doctor around here. I don't tell you how to run Engineering. If I say I'm fine, then I'm fine. Can we please leave it at that?"

Scott hesitated. "Well, if you're absolutely sure. Could ye spare a few minutes tae discuss what ye'll be wantin' loaded on the shuttlecraft?"

"Quite sure," McCoy replied. "In fact, I've already made a list."

Scott sat down reluctantly and the two men began to catalogue the items deemed necessary to deal with the emergency on the upcoming planet. It was a good deal longer than a few minutes before they had finished, and by that time the Engineer had almost forgotten the earlier incident.

McCoy hadn't. He just couldn't afford to be laid up - too many people depended on him - and he went on to prove the old adage about doctors making the worst patients as he pushed the whole event to the back of his mind and flatly refused to think about it any further.

In perfect keeping with the Science Officer's schedule, Mr Sulu eased the Enterprise smoothly into orbit around Cloros IV. The ion storm did not have quite the same respect for the Vulcan as the Navigator did, and raged on unabated.

Uhura was as close to losing her temper as the Bridge crew had ever seen her. She had been trying for hours to reach Governor Jorgensen on the planet surface, but the storm was playing havoc with communications. Several times she had been able to patch through a clear

signal, only to lose it again through static, and had to start with whole procedure all over again. Suddenly her attractive face lit up in a smile.

"Captain Kirk, I believe I have Governor Jorgensen for you."

"On screen, Lieutenant," the Captain replied, relieved to have finally made contact.

The interference was still there, but it wasn't as bad as it had been previously, nor was it hazy enough to stop Kirk admiring the attractive features and shapely outline of the planetary representative. He had to remind himself to listen as well as look, but professionalism took over.

"... welcomes you to Cloros IV," the husky female voice intoned. "Any assistance you can offer us at this time will be gratefully received."

Kirk's manner became all business-like. "A medical team and I will arrive shortly to help you in any way we can. If you could give us the coordinates of an appropriate landing site, we'll be with you as soon as we can."

"Transmitting now," replied the Governor. "I look forward to meeting you in person. Cloros IV out."

The screen flickered and once more showed a bird's eye view of the blue-green Earthlike planet far below.

The Captain stood up and headed towards the turbolift doors. He nodded briefly to Mr Scott, who settled himself comfortably into the command chair. Spock entered the lift at his side, and the two officers made their way to the shuttlecraft docking bay. McCoy was already there when they arrived.

"Well it's about time!" the Doctor grumbled. "I was just about getting ready to figure out how to fly this thing myself, but it looks like I've been saved the trouble."

"That would indeed have been inadvisable, Doctor," Spock replied. "I doubt very much if the medical team on Cloros IV could have coped with casualties as well as the epidemic."

"As I already said, I won't have to bother now that you're here. We'll just plug you into the computer and we can get under way."

"I must remind you that it is not yet possible to interface organic matter with that of a machine," Spock said evenly.

"Could've fooled me," the Doctor replied.

Spock raised an eyebrow.

The two shuttles began to fill with medical personnel from the Enterprise. Kirk handed each of his people a life support belt as they entered, with the instruction that they were to be activated immediately on landing. While the air on the surface was more than adequate and comfortable for humanoid life-forms, the belts were a necessary precaution as the filters would screen out any bacteria or germs, thus protecting the crew from whatever was doing so much harm to the colonists.

Dr M'Benga headed the landing party on the Galileo, and McCoy was in charge of the medical team on the Copernicus. Kirk was the official Federation representative and Spock, as Science Officer, would provide his expertise as and when required. Ensign Maston, one of Sulu's proteges, piloted the Galileo, and Spock the Copernicus. The two shuttles stayed close together as

the hangar doors opened to reveal the inky blackness of space, but once outside kept a more appropriate distance.

Mr Scott had previously adjusted the shuttles' sensors to compensate for the storm, and the trip itself proved to be uneventful. Ensign Maston proved himself to be worthy of the Helmsman's praise and piloted the Galileo to a smooth landing. Spock, of course, was not far behind, and displayed equally competent skills.

One by one the crew activated their life support belts, and were instantly surrounded by a faint yellow aura. Battery packs and power levels were double-checked by other crew members before Kirk felt satisfied enough to give the order to disembark. The doors opened with a soft whoosh, and the landing party got their first glimpse of Cloros IV.

The coordinates provided by Governor Jorgensen turned out to be a flat, grassy plain a short walk from what appeared to me a make-shift town. The Governor herself, accompanied by an aide, was waiting to greet the landing party as they disembarked.

Kirk smiled warmly and held out his hand. "I'm Captain James T Kirk of the USS Enterprise. This is my Chief Medical Officer, Dr McCoy, and my Science Officer, Mr Spock," he said, indicating the two men at his side. "Can you give us an update on the current situation?"

"We're very pleased to see you and your people, Captain. Welcome to Cloros IV." The Governor returned Kirk's smile, but anxiety clearly showed in her eyes. "Let me show you our medical facilities, and Dr Taylor here can give you a run-down on what's been happening."

The elderly man at her side spoke for the first time. His white lab coat was stained and crumpled, and the coveralls he was wearing underneath didn't seem in much better condition. There were large dark circles under his eyes, and he gave the impression of someone who hadn't slept for about a week.

"There have been twelve more deaths in the last two weeks," his tired voice intoned gravely. "We've run all the standard tests: blood samples; cell structures; urine analysis; complete body chemistry breakdowns; and every one has come up clear." Dark, worried brown eyes scrutinised McCoy's blue ones. "I want to know why my people are dying, Dr McCoy, and you are our last hope."

McCoy swallowed nervously. "That's what we're here for, Dr Taylor. We'll do the best we can."

The older man held the Doctor's gaze, nodded once, then together the group started the short journey to the town centre.

Visitors were rare on the frontier planet, and curious stares followed them as they passed all the various buildings, heading towards the town centre. Not that it could actually be called a town, Kirk mused. It was more a collection of dirt roads and mis-matched buildings which looked as though they just happened to be built close to one another. However, on closer inspection they appeared to be well made and in good repair. The streets looked clean, and the small gardens well cared for. These people obviously took a lot of pride in their settlement, and Kirk admired them for it.

The planet itself was very Earthlike. A large yellow sun blazed in the sky, partly hidden by wispy white clouds. Several well-cultivated fields could be

seen on the outskirts of the town, and high rolling hills filled the horizon. A river flowed gently through the southernmost part of the town, bringing much-needed water to its inhabitants, although judging by the local flora, it was not something which seemed to be in short supply.

A short time later they arrived at a large, untidy-looking construction of wood and metal, which looked as though it was held together with luck rather than design.

"Our hospital," announced Dr Taylor simply.

"You'll have to excuse its appearance," Governor Jorgensen said. "Until recently it was our meeting hall. We never envisaged the need to supply so many hospital beds. Our original hospital could only hold a few, so we've had to improvise with what was available. Already several extensions have been added."

As if to prove her words, several workmen dressed on builders' garb were busy at the far end of the building with planks of wood and sheets of metal, adding yet another 'ward'.

McCoy eyed the place dubiously, but for once decided tact was the better part of valour, and said nothing. He led the medical team inside, accompanied by Dr Taylor, while Captain Kirk and Mr Spock followed the Governor to her office, which was almost adjacent to the hospital itself.

Kirk noted that the Governor was even more stunning in person than her earlier appearance on the ship's viewscreen allowed. He judged her to be in her late twenties or early thirties at the most. Her long auburn hair was tied simply at the nape of her neck, and her

jeans and shirt did little to disguise her slim, shapely figure. The Captain found himself disappointed when he noticed the gold wedding band on the third finger of her left hand. He did not let it show.

Spock paid slightly more attention to the office than he did to its occupant. Although basic, everything appeared to be well-organized and efficient, he noted with approval.

The Governor indicated two plain wooden chairs opposite her desk. Kirk sat, but Spock remained standing.

"If you have no objections, Captain, I believe my skills could be put to better use elsewhere," the Vulcan said, and redirected his attention to Governor Jorgensen. "I would like to collect soil and food samples, analyse the water supply, and other such tasks - if I have your permission to do so?"

"Of course, Mr Spock," she replied. "My people will be happy to provide an assistance you may require."

"That will not be necessary, as I prefer to work alone, but thank you for the offer," the Vulcan replied, and glanced briefly at Kirk as he turned to leave the room.

Kirk nodded his consent. "Good hunting, Mr Spock," he said affably.

"I assure you, Captain Kirk, that I have no intention of indulging in the barbarity of preying on the native fauna."

Kirk smiled. "I'm sure you haven't, Spock. I simply mean to wish you luck."

The Vulcan considered this for a moment, sighed softly, and left the room without any further comment.

Kirk turned round and found

himself facing the Governor once again. She looked as though she was ready to explode with laughter, and as the door shut on the vulcan's back promptly proceeded to do so. Her laughter proved to be infectious, and soon they were both roaring heartily.

"Please forgive me, Captain Kirk," she choked out between breaths. "I meant no disrespect to your First Officer, only it was so unexpected, and I'm sure if the situation here wasn't so serious it wouldn't have seemed nearly so funny."

"Don't worry about it," Kirk replied, still grinning. "Mr Spock wouldn't be offended, and besides, it's good so see you smile. You look like you haven't done that in quite some time."

"No," she replied, sobering quickly. "There really hasn't been much to laugh about lately." A short silence ensued before she continued talking. "Would you like to see our town in a bit more detail, Captain? I'd be happy to show you around."

"Thank you, yes," Kirk replied. "And 'Captain' sounds much too official. 'Jim' will do fine."

Governor Jorgensen smiled and headed towards the door, followed by Kirk. "In that case I hope you'll return the compliment and call me Susan."

Together they left the comfort of the neat, air-conditioned office and made their way outside into the scorching sun.

Leonard McCoy had served in Starfleet as a Doctor for many years, and over that time he had witnessed many heart-rending sights, seen the effects of famine, plague, war, radiation poisoning - and far, far too much death. His job

would be considerably easier, he reflected, if somehow he could just harden himself to it all, but try as he might it was something he could never manage to do. Most of the time he kept the anger and pain inside himself - he was much too professional to let it affect his patients - but it damn well helped to have someone like Spock around sometimes for him to take his frustrations out on. Looking around the makeshift hospital, he sincerely wished that the Vulcan was around right now. He took a deep breath and carried on with his inspection.

It seemed that patients were everywhere, lying on beds, on cots, even on bare wooden pallets, but thankfully none as yet had been relegated to the floor. In spite of the overcrowding the environment remained reasonably clean and comfortable, although it was obvious that the medical staff were hard-pressed to cope with the situation.

Both doctors and nurses rushed around tirelessly, tending to the needs of those too ill or sick to care for themselves. Even when nothing further could be done for a patient, McCoy knew that a kind word, a bit of encouragement or personal attention could go a long way to making the illness more bearable. There didn't seem to be any lack of caring here, and his admiration for these people increased yet again.

Dr M'Benga and Nurse Chapel took charge of setting up the temporary laboratory and equipment which had been brought down from the Enterprise. More junior staff members distributed the much-needed medication, and McCoy walked purposefully around the wards, trying to get a feel for the situation, a kind of overview, which had proved useful on more than one occasion in the past.

The first patient he examined was a young girl who appeared to be no more

than nine or ten. She lay listlessly on the bed as McCoy bent over her. She hardly seemed aware of his presence as he carried out his ministrations.

He smiled his most charming smile. "Hello there, miss. I'm Dr McCoy. Mind if I take a quick look at you?"

"Will it hurt?" asked the girl, her voice so low that McCoy had to bend down further to hear her.

"No, not at all," he replied. "In fact, it'll be all over before you even know it."

"Are you from the big Starship?" she asked curiously.

"You bet I am," McCoy replied, putting on his best Southern accent.

"Well then, I guess it'll be okay."

The Doctor adjusted his tricorder and held it over the girl. Blood pressure and respiration showed normal levels, but a frown deepened on his face as he read the results from the cardiac monitor. There was a definite irregularity in her heart. He continued with his examination, the instruments duly recording water retention, muscle weakness, and a partial paralysis of the left eye, all of which McCoy could see for himself without the benefit of electronic assistance.

He carried on with his examination, assessing the full extent of the damage. He pressed the syringe against the child's badly-bloated arm, extracting a blood sample for later analysis. he had already collected several samples from other patients, but it was always helpful to have a broad range for the computers to work with and compare.

He placed the syringe back in his pack, straightened up, and then gasped in

shock. The pain had come back.

McCoy sat down heavily on the side of the bed. His head reeled and he felt sick. The girl was staring at him.

"Are you sick too?" she asked innocently.

McCoy swallowed, took several deep breaths, and fought to control the pain. Mercifully, it abated as suddenly as it had come.

"N-no," he stammered. "I'm fine, really. Just tired."

The girl accepted his word readily and thought no more about it as the Doctor took his leave and walked slowly off down the corridor.

Captain Kirk was enjoying his tour of the town. Governor Jorgensen proved herself to be an excellent guide and a charming hostess. For the dozenth time he wished he could switch off the life support belt. It wasn't uncomfortable, but the golden aura made him stick out like a sore thumb, and he found himself the subject of more than one curious gaze. Realising the necessity of its purpose, he continued to keep it activated while simultaneously trying to ignore its presence.

The viability of supplying the remaining settlers with life belts of their own had been discussed at great length, but it had been deemed pointless since they had already likely been exposed to the cause of the disease, while Kirk and his crew had not.

As the afternoon wore on Kirk learned more about both the history of the planet and the hardy people now living there. It transpired that the settlers

were direct descendants of an old North American colony of Amish.

Since it had long ago become impractical, not to mention virtually impossible, to ignore the continued technological progress rapidly expanding throughout the Earth, a limited amount of technology had reluctantly been accepted by their reclusive forefathers, but they still preferred to live as simply as possible, and favoured manual labour over the accomplishments of machines. The settlement on Cloros IV was an experimental venture, an attempt to reconcile two opposing lifestyles. Until the disease had come along, it had worked relatively well.

All that day Kirk had noticed several anomalies in the construction of the town and the way in which the occupants lived. Susan's account explained much: the Human workers in the fields instead of robots; the lack of synthetic building materials; the missing communications satellites; but most obvious of all, the absence of land cars. He had, of course, seen the horses grazing contentedly in the fields, but had assumed they were used recreationally. He found it hard to believe that in this day and age they could conceivably be used for transport. However he had seen far stranger arrangements on other planets, and simply shrugged his shoulders as the Vulcan logo of infinite diversity in infinite combinations came to mind.

Kirk had found the people to be warm, welcoming and very friendly. Once again he hoped fervently that McCoy and his team could get to the bottom of the problem and give them the help they so desperately needed. He took the opportunity of talking to as many of the locals as he could, hoping to pick up some clue or hint of information that could be of help. So far, luck had not been with him.

Heading out of town, they came to a small, modest homestead nestled in a picturesque valley. Like most of the other farms and ranches it appeared both attractive and sturdy. An elderly couple emerged from the building, waving cheerfully at their two visitors. As they got closer it was obvious that there was a special closeness between the three colonists. The man hurried up to Susan and grasped her in a big bear hug, which was returned with equal enthusiasm.

"Captain Kirk," the younger woman said, smiling, "I'd like to introduce you to my parents, Jacob and Catherine Pedersen."

"I'm very pleased to meet you both," Kirk replied cordially. "You must be very proud of your daughter, a lovely and charming woman."

"Thank you, Captain," replied Catherine Pedersen. "We think so too, but of course we're biased. Won't you come in the house and eat supper with us? We have plenty, and would very much enjoy the company."

Kirk was surprised to realise that he was indeed hungry, not having eaten since morning, and gratefully accepted the invitation. Together, settlers and Starship Captain entered the small dwelling. Like the outside, the interior proved to be neat, orderly and practical. Kirk couldn't help but feel he'd been swept back in time as he glanced around at the antiquated furnishings.

The Captain made himself comfortable in a large, over-stuffed armchair. Susan and her father joined him in the lounge while Mrs Pedersen busied herself in the small, compact kitchen preparing dinner. Small talk soon developed into relaxed conversation, and Kirk was reminded nostalgically of boyhood evenings in Iowa.

"Come and eat!" shouted a motherly voice from the kitchen.

The rest of the party promptly adjourned to the dinner table, where several dishes of assorted meat, fruit and vegetables waited them. The food certainly smelled appetising, and Kirk eyed the fare with anticipation. *Just as well Spock isn't here*, he mused as a large joint of roast beef was proudly placed in the centre.

Kirk cleared his throat. "Will Mr Jorgensen not be joining us?" he asked politely.

There was an embarrassed silence at the table as three pairs of eyes tried desperately not to meet his. It was Susan who spoke first.

"I am a widow, Captain. My husband Sven was one of the first victims of the disease." She paused. "He died about six months ago."

It was Kirk's turn to look embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I had no idea," he said gently.

"No, it's my fault," she replied haltingly. "I should have told you, but somehow the time never seemed to be quite right."

Hazel eyes held deep blue ones sympathetically as he searched for words to comfort her, but none were forthcoming.

"Please, eat," Jacob Pedersen finally interrupted. "It would indeed be a shame for all this good food to go to waste. The past is past, and it's a wise man, or woman, who looks to the future."

Relieved to have the subject changed, Kirk picked up his knife and fork and started eating, but had to pause

momentarily to double check the identity of the food he had just put into his mouth. It looked and smelled like beef, but there was an oddly metallic taste to it, distorting the flavour. Out of good manners he said nothing and continued with his meal, but made a mental note to take a small sample away for Spock to analyse later. He discreetly hid a small piece in his utility belt, and was very much relieved that his actions had gone unnoticed by his hosts.

The evening wore on, the earlier cordiality having been restored somewhat, and Kirk found himself reluctant to return to the Galileo. At the same time he was eager to find out what progress, if any, his crew had made with their research.

It was missions like this one that made Jim Kirk feel superfluous. He wasn't a doctor like McCoy, or a scientist like Spock. His place was out among the stars, dealing with the new or unexpected. Even encounters with the Klingons challenged him and made him feel 'in control' to a certain extent. He was an all-rounder, not a specialist, but he also knew when to take a back seat and let the crew come into their own. This was one of those times. Kirk walked into the night, his pace quickening unconsciously as the Galileo and Copernicus came once more into view.

A temporary dome had been erected adjacent to the two shuttlecraft, providing temporary sterile quarters for the crew while they remained planetside. Although it was possible to return to the Enterprise, it was not necessarily practical. Kirk and the landing party were more than prepared to rough it for a while when necessary.

Once safely inside, Kirk found it a relief to deactivate his life support belt. After first inserting a new battery pack in

readiness for the next day he carefully laid it aside.

Spock had already returned, and was busy at the small computer terminal which had been erected next to a make-shift laboratory.

"Good evening, Mr Spock. I trust you have had an eventful day?" the Captain asked.

"Indeed yes," the Vulcan replied. "I have taken numerous tricorder readings of both flora and fauna, but as yet nothing out of the ordinary has been found."

"What about Dr McCoy?" Kirk asked, frowning in frustration. "Has he reported any progress?"

"Unknown, Captain. I believe the Doctor is still at the hospital, but he should be checking in soon," the Vulcan replied, then paused. "I have, however, identified a nitrate of unusual properties present in the soil of this planet. It has proved to be most fascinating."

"What does it do?"

"As yet that is undetermined. I believe the compound to be a mutation of a naturally occurring substance, but it is proving extremely difficult to regress the nitrate back to its original form."

Kirk digested this new piece of information. "Could this nitrate be somehow responsible for the epidemic?"

"Unlikely, Jim. Current analysis shows it to be harmless substance which does not contain anything known to be detrimental to Human or animal life-forms. I will, of course, continue with the investigation."

"Oh - I almost forgot," Kirk added,

digging into his belt for the small piece of meat. "I'd like you to analyse this. It has a very strange flavour to it. Something's not quite as it should be."

"I trust you are suffering no ill effects?" the Vulcan enquired, concern almost - but not quite - showing on his impassive features.

"No," smiled Kirk, "I'm fine, just curious as to why it tastes so odd."

Spock hid his distaste as he picked up the small piece of meat, made several adjustments to his tricorder, and ran it over the minute sample. His left eyebrow rose slightly.

"Most curious. It contains traces of the nitrate I mentioned earlier. It would appear that it has ingressed into the food chain."

"But it's harmless, right?"

"Evidence would show that it does appear to be."

Kirk relaxed visibly and lay down on his bunk to try and catch up on some sleep.

McCoy entertained no such thoughts as he completed yet another round of the Clorian hospital. He stopped briefly to watch his staff in action. He was proud of each and every one of them. They had immediately thrown themselves into the crisis one hundred and ten percent. If for some reason they did fail on this mission, he reflected, it would not be through lack of effort. Having seen first hand the misery and suffering of the colonists, he resolved to double his efforts.

He had spent a very long day

among the wards, seeing patient after patient, each showing the same symptoms, only to a different degree. An autopsy on two of the most recently deceased had revealed heart failure as the ultimate cause of death. McCoy knew only too well that the hearts had given out as a result of other pressures on the bodies and were not in themselves affected by the disease in any direct way.

His keen mind had also detected the start of the main symptoms in quite a few of the other settlers who were not yet aware that they had been affected. Having wrestled for some time with his conscience he decided against telling them; there seemed little point at this time as they were no further forward in finding answers, and there was nothing he or anyone else could do.

The last few hours had been spent analysing the numerous samples collected earlier in the day from the patients. Absolutely no foreign substance of any kind had been found. There was nothing to account for the terrible disease at all. He fervently hoped that Spock had had better luck, although he knew it was a word the Vulcan would hardly approve of. He finally decided the day had been long enough and headed back to the camp to catch up with Jim and the others.

The smell of hot coffee filtered through Kirk's unconsciousness. Drowsily he rubbed his eyes, stretched, and rose from his bunk. Spock handed him a cup of the steaming black liquid, which he accepted gratefully.

"I trust you slept well, Captain?" the Vulcan asked solicitously.

"Thanks, Spock, just fine," Kirk replied, glancing at his watch and reaching for his communicator

simultaneously. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Scott here."

"0700 check-in, Scotty. Status report?"

"Everything's fine on the Enterprise, Captain, but the ion storm is getting worse. I've been doin' a wee bit o' experimentin' wi' the communications relay, and ah've managed to compensate for the interference somewhat, but the transporters are still inoperative."

Kirk suddenly realised that the signal had been remarkably free from interference and static compared to earlier communications, but he still felt as though he was listening to someone shouting from a long distance away. No doubt he sounded very similar to Mr Scott.

"The improvements are great, Scotty, thanks. I shouldn't think we'll need the transporter before the storm abates, but keep at them anyway. Kirk out."

"Enterprise out," the Scotsman replied.

Kirk flipped his communicator shut as the signal was terminated at the other end.

"Isshat coffee I smell?" muttered a bleary-eyed McCoy, head popping out from an untidy heap of blankets and jumbled clothes.

"It certainly is, Bones - here," Jim Kirk said, handing his friend a cup while he got a refill for himself. "You look tired. Late night last night?"

"Late morning, more like," grumbled the Doctor as he searched for a clean uniform to put on. He glanced

across the room at Spock, who looked as immaculately dressed as ever. Absolutely nobody, he decided, had the right to look that neat and tidy at this unearthly hour of the morning. He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice.

"I need your report about the nitrate, Spock. It looks promising. Hopefully it'll give us our first lead into solving this riddle."

"Riddle, Doctor?" the Vulcan replied.

"You know damn well what I mean!" McCoy snapped. It was still too early in the day for the ongoing game of verbal battle the two indulged in from time to time. Realising that he had perhaps sounded a bit harsher than he actually meant to, he softened his manner somewhat.

"All I mean is, that at least it's a start."

Spock inclined his head slightly to one side. "Possibly," he said, and once again returned to his work.

McCoy sighed and reached for his clothes.

Ignoring the Doctor, Spock addressed the Captain instead. "I am still unable to break down this compound to its original state. I feel I must return to the Enterprise and utilise the more sophisticated computer equipment on the ship. If you wish to return with me, or require any further supplies, I will be happy to comply.

Kirk hesitated for a second, then shook his head decisively. "No, Spock, I think I'll stay here. Governor Jorgensen has promised me a tour of the settlement. It would be rude if I didn't keep the appointment with the lady."

Neither Spock nor McCoy were oblivious to the twinkle in his eye as he made the last statement. Both knew better than to comment.

"You know, Spock, you may have a point about going back to the Enterprise," McCoy cut in thoughtfully. "I've got a few things myself that I'd like checked out, and conditions here are somewhat primitive compared to Sickbay. If you're going back, then I'd like to come along with you."

"Captain?" Spock queried.

"Of course, by all means. if you think you can do more good there than here, go. But you'll have to take the Galileo; you heard Mr Scott about the state of the transporters."

"As you wish," the Vulcan replied. "Will one hour from now be suitable for take-off, Doctor?"

"Fine, just fine," mumbled McCoy, already gathering various data cassettes, notes, and other bits and pieces he would need to take back with him. M'Benga and Chapel were more than capable of managing in his absence, and he came to the conclusion that Kirk could manage very well without him as well, especially when he was in the company of a beautiful woman.

The Captain arrived at the Pedersens' home shortly after 08.30, just as the breakfast dishes were being cleared away. They welcomed him warmly, but he declined their offer of breakfast; last night's dinner was still too fresh in his mind.

Susan came down the stairs, smiling. "It's lovely to see you again, Jim, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to break

our engagement for today."

Kirk looked worried. "Problems?" he probed.

"Yes," she replied, managing to frown and look embarrassed at the same time. "Some homesteaders had two of their best laying hens stolen last night. It's a serious offence. Livestock is more valuable than gold to us right now. You can't eat gold, and without the livestock to supplement our diet, we starve."

"Stolen!" Kirk was incredulous. "Susan I've met many of your people, and they just don't seem like the kind who would steal from one another. I find it really hard to believe."

"So do I, Jim, so do I," she replied, "but this is just the latest in a long line of similar incidents. I had hoped not to bother you with this. It's something we're not very proud of."

"I understand, but if you don't mind I'd like to tag along. Maybe I can help. Sometimes an overview from someone not directly involved can place a new perspective on things."

Susan hesitated. "Well, they do say that two heads are better than one. Do you ride horses, Captain?"

A short while later, seated on two very spirited mounts, they rode out of town and into a small valley at the foot of the hills surrounding the settlement. Kirk, at one time an experienced rider, found himself a little rusty from lack of practice, and conversation was initially sparse as he concentrated on simply staying in the saddle. Gradually he found his expertise returning, and slowly he became more confident. His horse was a beautiful, graceful animal with strong, sleek lines, and very soon he was actually enjoying the experience.

Before long they could make out a trio of small bungalows nestled among the foothills. Susan changed direction slightly and they began an approach that would take them to the middle of the three houses. Compared to the other two this one looked slightly more run down. Although it was larger, Kirk noticed that the door was leaning drunkenly to one side, a window was cracked and several tiles were missing from the roof. A scruffy-looking mongrel got up from under the shade of the porch and barked loudly at the newcomers. Kirk's horse shied nervously at the warning, but he quickly reined it under control.

A young girl of about nineteen emerged from the yard behind the house carrying a basket of laundry under one arm, and greeted the visitors. A number of other children, their ages ranging from about four to fifteen, suddenly appeared as if by magic from all directions to see what all the commotion was about.

Susan greeted the girl and her family warmly. "Good morning, Rachel. I heard you had some more trouble last night."

"Two more of our hens were stolen," she replied grimly. "Both were good layers, too - they'll be badly missed. I need the eggs for the kids, as there's hardly enough food to go around as it is."

"Did you hear or see anything unusual?" Kirk asked.

Rachel turned to Kirk as if noticing him for the first time, and looked at the Governor questioningly.

Susan cleared her throat and spoke up. "Rachel, I'm sorry, I should have introduced you. This is Captain James Kirk of the USS Enterprise. His people are here trying to help us with the epidemic."

"Have you discovered what the problem is yet?" she asked earnestly.

"No, not yet, but hopefully we'll have some answers before too much longer. Now, about those hens..."

"Excuse my manners. Please, won't you come into the house?" she replied, indicating the doorway just behind her.

Susan and Kirk followed her inside, grateful to be out of the sun. Rachel went over to the sink, poured water into two large glasses, added some lemonade mix and handed one to each of her guests. They all gathered round the table and the girl proceeded to tell the story of the theft of the previous evening. Nervous of the visitors, the other children mostly kept their distance, but now and again a head would appear curiously around the door. Kirk smiled and waved them inside, but they always disappeared again, preferring to watch from a safe distance.

"It was just like all the other times," Rachel said sadly, a hint of anger creeping into her voice. "We got the chores finished just after sunset. Paul, my brother, fed the chickens then and they were fine. We ate supper, some of the little ones had a bath, I did some mending, and then we went to bed. Nobody heard or saw anything. Toby didn't even bark."

The dog raised its head at the sound of its name being mentioned, but soon lay back down and returned to sleep when no instructions were forthcoming.

"What about your parents - did they hear anything?" Kirk asked.

"My parents are dead, Captain," Rachel responded. "They both died of the plague. I look after the kids now - there's no-one else." Tears welled up in her eyes as she tried to keep her voice steady.

The thought of these kids growing up out here alone without their mother or father aroused deep sympathy within the Captain. It seemed everyone on the planet had lost people close to them. The effects of the epidemic really hit home as he looked at her grief-stricken face.

As tragic as the circumstances were, Kirk knew that there was very little he personally could do. Action of any kind was preferable to sitting around doing nothing. He decided his best course of action was to throw himself wholeheartedly into the matter at hand.

"How often does this sort of thing happen?" Kirk wanted to know, beginning to enjoy the role of Sherlock Holmes.

"Ever since we moved out here, about three years ago," the girl replied. "At first it was only now and again, and mainly little things like tools a bucket, some blankets, but then other things started to go missing too; even clothes from our washing line would disappear."

"Washing line?" asked Kirk, trying to figure out what on earth - or rather, on Cloros - such an object could possibly be.

"As you already know, Jim," Susan replied, the start of a smile spreading across her features, "we like to do things simply here. We wash our clothes in water and detergent, then hang them outside on a piece of rope to dry."

Kirk tried to imagine someone going to all that trouble simply to get clothes clean. He was too used to putting his soiled garments into the recycler chute in his cabin and then dialling up new ones. The whole process took about ten seconds.

"That must take hours to do," he commented, not bothering to hide his

surprise.

"Yes, it does, but I can assure you that it is also effective," Susan replied, amused at his naivety.

Kirk decided to change tack. "How about your neighbours? Have they also suffered similar losses?"

Rachel nodded her head in confirmation. "Most of the people in this area have. Other sectors have also been affected, but it seems to be worse around here."

Kirk was thoughtful. "Mind if I take a look around outside?"

"No, please go ahead," Rachel replied. "It can't hurt, I guess."

Not exactly inspired by the confidence the young woman showed in his abilities he left the cottage and went outside. This time it was Susan who tagged along with him.

The hen house was out back, a secure enough looking structure with a fairly good-sized wire mesh run for the chickens to exercise in. They didn't seem unduly concerned by the sudden scrutiny, and went on pecking at the ground for stray bits of grain that might have been missed earlier.

The entrance to the enclosure was a simple screen door. A length of wood was placed across two brackets, acting as a lock. Something a child could open, Kirk mused. What he found particularly disconcerting was that whoever had stolen the hens had gone to the trouble of securing the door behind them. Not the typical behaviour of a thief.

Kirk started walking in a spiral away from the chicken coop. The ground was dry and dusty. Although it was

unlikely that a trail remained, it was still possible. Now and again he stooped down, examining the soil, occasionally running it through his fingers or gently misplacing a small rock. Susan stood patiently in the background, watching intently and trying to analyse her feelings for the Starship Captain.

She was forced to admit to herself that she thoroughly enjoyed being in his company. When she was with him she felt the weight of responsibility and burden of office slip from her shoulders. It was obvious that he was used to taking charge of difficult situations and, more importantly, winning. It was also difficult not to be attracted to him. She was realistic enough to know that being found attractive by the opposite sex was also something James T Kirk was used to dealing with.

The sound of his voice calling her jolted her back to the present. Blushing like a schoolgirl, and furious at herself for doing so, she made her way across to where he was squatting on the ground.

"Found something?" she asked curiously, looking down, trying to follow his gaze. The sand here looked exactly like it did everywhere else, so she bent her head down for a closer look, puzzlement showing on her face.

"There," pointed Kirk, and when Susan didn't reply he explained what he had discovered. "There probably was a trail here earlier, but one which someone has gone to a lot of trouble to conceal. The small stones in this area clustered together in groups, with a relatively clear path in the middle. What it means," he explained, "is that someone has deliberately tried to cover their tracks, but in doing so has left a trail of a different kind for us to follow."

Susan smiled, looking suitably

impressed as he finished his narrative. Kirk wondered if his Vulcan Science Officer would also have been impressed with his logic, but no doubt if Spock had been there he would have found the trail in half the time.

Mr Spock, as it turned out, had other things on his mind. It had not taken long for him and Dr McCoy to load the Galileo with their samples, and they were currently leaving the orbit of Cloros IV on approach to the Enterprise. The ion storm had not adversely affected the shuttle's instrumentation thanks to Mr Scott's adjustments, but the ride had been turbulent, taking most of the Vulcan's skill just to keep the craft on course.

The Doctor, he noticed had been remarkably quiet throughout the trip. Spock turned round to check on his companion, and immediately noticed how pale and drawn the other man looked.

"I was under the impression that you found travelling by shuttlecraft preferable to using the transporter, Doctor," the Vulcan commented.

When no reply was forthcoming Spock turned his attention completely towards McCoy, who was rigidly clutching the arms of the chair. The Doctor opened his mouth to reply, but only a soft moan came out. He suddenly let go of the arm rests, clutched his side in obvious agony, then promptly lapsed into unconsciousness. Only the mandatory safety belt stopped him from collapsing onto the floor of the shuttle.

Spock wasted no time in activating the auto-pilot and rushed to the Doctor's side. Going into the medical kit he extracted one of several instruments and ran it over the inert form. Quickly and

efficiently he made McCoy as comfortable as possible and headed back to the main console.

"Galileo to Enterprise," his deep voice intoned.

"Enterprise here, Mr Spock," a cheerful-sounding Uhura replied.

"Please advise Mr Scott to affix a tractor beam to the Galileo and bring her in manually. I also have a medical emergency on board, and will require assistance of that nature immediately on arrival."

There followed a few seconds of silence as Uhura didn't respond right away. When she did reply worry was plainly evident in her voice. "Mr Scott confirms that the tractor beam has now been activated; but sir, we don't have a medical team on board to deal with an emergency. All Sickbay personnel are on Cloros IV."

If anyone else had been present they would have been witness to the look of surprise that fleetingly crossed the Vulcan's face. However, there was no-one there to witness the event.

"Do you mean to tell me, Lieutenant, that Dr McCoy left no-one on board to deal with the needs of the crew during this situation on the planet?" the Vulcan demanded.

"No, sir," Uhura answered. "Dr McCoy left Nurse Elliott on board to deal with any injuries of a minor nature, but he said he would return immediately if his services were required here. Do you wish me to contact him on Cloros?"

It was Spock's turn to pause. "That will not be necessary. It is Dr McCoy himself who requires the attention. Would you please contact Dr M'Benga

and advise him to stand by for further instructions. If Captain Kirk can be reached, please contact him also and advise him of the current situation."

Before Uhura could reply Mr Scott's voice could be clearly heard over the intercom. "What's this about Dr McCoy? Is he all right?"

"If he was 'all right', Mr Scott, I would hardly be asking for medical assistance," the Vulcan replied matter-of-factly. "Please have Nurse Elliott and an anti-grav stretcher standing by in the landing bay on our arrival. Spock out."

The minutes passed with agonising slowness as the tractor beam hauled the Galileo steadily home to the Enterprise. At last she docked, and with the closure of the landing bay doors and repressurisation of the cabin, the all-clear signal finally lit up in the shuttle's interior.

As soon as the door opened Mr Scott and an extremely anxious-looking young woman wearing the Medical Department insignia on her uniform rushed forward, each carrying an end of the stretcher. Spock noted that the woman carried a small medi-kit in her hand. The Vulcan ushered them both inside, where they could plainly see an unconscious McCoy stretched out over a row of seats. He looked deathly pale, and an arm dangled conspicuously over the edge, onto the floor.

"It's all my fault," muttered the Scotsman, his voice filled with self-recrimination.

Spock looked at him curiously.

"He nearly collapsed in Sickbay a few days ago, and I never said anything' about it tae anyone. Mr Spock, he said he'd be all right."

"Do not blame yourself, Mr Scott," the Vulcan replied. "As a physician, the responsibility for his medical condition is his alone. No matter how noble the reasons for his silence," he added softly.

"But what's wrong wi' him?" asked Scott anxiously, trying to look at both Spock and the nurse at the same time.

"It is my opinion that the Doctor requires an emergency appendectomy," the Vulcan replied, placing McCoy's prone form on the stretcher.

The Engineer could only stare, mouth agape, while Nurse Elliott's eyes opened in shock, and her words came tumbling out in a rush.

"But I couldn't... I mean, I don't know what to do. Dr McCoy has never even let me assist at an operation before. I wouldn't know where to start. I'm only a nurse, junior grade."

Spock looked at her severely and said nothing further. He and Mr Scott picked up the ends of the stretcher and proceeded to make their way to Sickbay. The young woman found that she nearly had to break into a run to keep pace with the two men.

The sight of the small party winding its way through the corridors was more than enough to make any sensible crewperson step aside quickly. The few they did meet did so with haste, worried looks on their faces as they recognised the casualty. The Doctor continued to moan softly, completely unaware of the chaos surrounding him.

The doors to Sickbay whooshed open as they approached and Dr McCoy was laid carefully on the operating table. No-one was especially surprised to see that Lt Uhura was also present, awaiting their arrival. Her presence there

remained unquestioned.

She walked directly up to Spock. "I have a communications link established with Dr M'Benga on Cloros," she said, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice. "I've had it relayed straight to Sickbay so contact doesn't have to go through the Bridge first." She pulled herself up straighter in an attempt to suppress her anxiety. "I have also contacted the Captain and briefed him on the situation. He says that he can't get back to the Copernicus for several hours, but he'll get there as soon as he can. He also said that he knew Mr Spock would do everything he could for the Doctor, and I was to keep him informed of the situation."

Uhura paused, looking up at Spock, trying to anticipate just what he intended to do. She would have been extremely surprised to learn that the Vulcan was also trying to figure out a solution to the same problem. He stood there gazing impassively down at the patient. Only the erectness of his stance and the tension in his muscles gave any indication of his deep concern.

James Kirk was also deeply concerned. His mind tried to grasp the concept of Bones lying on the operating table undergoing surgery instead of being the one who always performed it. The phrase 'Physician, heal thyself' came into mind as he pondered the situation. He couldn't help adding a heartfelt 'Please' onto the end of the statement.

"Damn it - why *now*?" he said angrily, slamming his communicator shut.

All morning he and Susan had followed the trail of the thief over the dusty landscape and through the foothills. Eventually the effort of

concealing the tracks had been abandoned as the petty criminal had felt more secure about not being followed. The trail clearly led to a small cave in the distance, where Kirk was sure both the thief and the hens could be found.

Compared to McCoy's safety the thief mattered little to him, but it would take hours to get back to where they had left the horses, and even longer to get to the Copernicus. Engineering had already confirmed that the transporter could not yet be used safely. He had considered risking it anyway, but finally decided that he could do Bones no good at all by 'getting his atoms scrambled halfway across the galaxy'. Guilt gnawed at him just the same as he fervently wished that he could be there for his friend instead of down on Cloros playing detective.

He looked across at Susan, who was watching him sympathetically, then looked again at the cave entrance, weighing up in his mind the delay involved in investigating any further.

"You go on back to the ship," Susan said gently. "I understand how you feel about your friend. I can handle the rest of this by myself. I assure you, I managed fine before you came here, Jim. I am the Governor, and the responsibility for this is mine."

Kirk hesitated and then sighed. He could no more let her walk in there alone than he could walk away from the Enterprise.

"No, we go in together," he said firmly. "Whoever's in there could be dangerous, not to mention a little annoyed at being caught out."

Kirk drew his phaser, checked that the setting was on light stun, and stealthily made his way to the entrance of the cave. He knew that by the time he

could have reached the Enterprise McCoy would have recovered - or not. He refused to let his mind dwell on the latter possibility.

Several large boulders were conveniently placed near the entrance. He and Susan made good use of the cover they provided as they slowly crept closer, until they were no more than a few metres away. Both were startled when a voice suddenly boomed out from the cave.

"You may put down your weapons, Human. We have no wish for violence, and will surrender peaceably."

The word 'Human' had set off several alarm bells in Kirk's head. He ducked further down behind the largest of the boulders, almost throwing Susan to the ground in the process. Carefully he aimed his phaser at the entrance and waited to see who would emerge from the cavern. His look of defiance soon turned to one of astonishment as four very bedraggled, nervous-looking Romulans appeared. The idea of a nervous Romulan was something of a contradiction in terms, but the sorry-looking group didn't appear to be in any condition to cause harm to anyone.

Relaxing slightly, but still cautious, wary of a trap, Kirk emerged from behind the boulder, motioning to Susan to stay where she was. The Governor had other ideas, however, and walked boldly towards the group.

"Who are you? And what are you doing on this planet?" she asked in her best authoritative voice.

Kirk could see the anger in her eyes as she spoke, and knew that he had to take control of the situation before she put herself and possibly him in danger. Even in their weakened state, he knew

only too well from previous experience just how powerful a Romulan could be. Gripping her arm firmly, and squeezing hard, he yanked her back towards him and then purposefully stepped forward. Susan glared at him fiercely, but nevertheless acquiesced to his wishes.

"I am Captain James T Kirk of the USS Enterprise," he said forcefully, "and an explanation of your presence here would be a good place to start."

If his name or reputation had been recognised the Romulans gave no such indication. They stood meekly together in their small group, staring the ground and at each other rather than at the two Humans who stood before them. The group consisted of two males and two females. One of the females, the smaller of the two, took a tentative step forward, hands outstretched, and looked directly at the Captain.

"I am T'Lea," she said. "My companions and I are biologists, formerly of Outpost 14 in the Shirrak Quadrant of the Romulan Empire. We left of our own free will, and seek asylum with the United Federation of Planets."

Kirk blinked, trying to ensure that this wasn't all some kind of mirage that would simply disappear when he opened his eyes again, but all four Romulans were present and correct, eyeing him expectantly, trying to gauge his reaction to the situation. Kirk wasn't quite sure what his reaction to the situation should be. Any minute now he half expected to see a bunch of Klingons walking round the corner waving a white flag, or T'Pol of Vulcan to appear wearing a Santa Claus costume. All three events were equally likely in his estimation, but nonetheless, just such an unlikely occurrence had taken place, and everyone was looking to him for the next move.

"And just why would four Romulans living in a cave on Cloros IV wish to seek asylum with the United Federation of Planets?" he asked warily, keeping his phaser aimed carefully at their bodies.

"It's a long story, Captain," T'Lea replied tiredly.

"I can assure you that no-one is going anywhere until I get to hear it," he responded firmly.

T'Lea turned to her companions who, one by one, nodded their assent. Somewhat hesitantly she turned back to Kirk.

"Before I begin, I believe we would all be more comfortable sitting down. My husband Jamal is unwell, and none of us have eaten in quite some time."

Not quite a plea, but Kirk knew what it must have cost her to ask. Showing weakness was not a Romulan trait. The male at her side, whom Kirk took to be her mate, had glared angrily at her as she made the suggestion, but said nothing, preferring to maintain a stony silence.

Susan Jorgensen found her voice again. "It would seem to be a reasonable request, Jim," she whispered softly in his ear.

Kirk considered the idea for a moment or two, then motioned the group to sit. He realised that such a position would decrease the likelihood of any sudden moves on their part, giving him a slight advantage if it became necessary. He declined to sit himself, preferring to remain upright, relaxing his position only slightly by leaning back against the boulder, which gave him a feeling of security at his rear.

T'Lea cleared her throat and began her narrative. "As I already said, we are scientists - biologists - and until recently we were working on a substance called Danokene. Life is hard on our colony worlds, and food shortages are a common problem. We found that by changing the molecular structure of a certain nitrate and genetically altering its structure, when it is introduced into the eco-system of Class M planets it dramatically enhances the vitamins and minerals present in the edible flora of that planet. In short, Captain, the food then become an ideal food, rich in nutritional value."

"This Danokene - it actually works?" asked Kirk, already thinking about the benefits that could be reaped on other frontier worlds, both Romulan and Federation alike.

T'Lea looked reluctant to continue. "To an extent, yes. Unfortunately, not all the compounds react to the same degree. Most showed considerable increases but," and she sighed heavily, "it also completely eliminates every single B vitamin complex from the compound. We tried to make adjustments to compensate, but none were successful."

Jamal, who up until now had remained silent, cut in angrily, his voice tinged with anger and bitterness. "Our own government accused us of sabotage. They believed that we had deliberately failed in our attempts to solve the problem."

"That was my fault," T'Lea interrupted. "Instead of improving the compound, they wanted us to isolate the factor that caused the depletion. They saw only a possible weapon, where we saw hope for our people instead."

"So what you're saying is that you didn't exactly approve of your new assignment?" Kirk asked.

"Not only did we not approve," Jamal replied, "but we had no intention of letting our research be turned into some new kind of bio-weapon. With the help of Kuron and S'Tal we stole a scout ship and fled the research station, taking our work with us."

Kirk held up his hand. "You stole a scout ship and got away, just like that, from Romulan space? I find that very hard to believe."

"The outpost was primarily a scientific operation, Captain Kirk, not a military one, and we didn't escape as easily as we thought we did," Jamal continued. "Our intention was to make for the Neutral Zone and then Federation space, and surrender ourselves, seeking political asylum."

"We were followed," T'Lea interrupted. "There were very discreet about it, wanting to confirm our intentions before they arrested us, but we knew they were there. We got as far as what you call Cloros when they started to move in, so we beamed down with what we could take with us, and rigged the ship to self-destruct before they got too close. We've been here ever since."

"And just how long would that be?" Kirk asked.

"Approximately three and a half of your years," T'Lea replied.

Susan gasped, shaken by the news. "Then that means you've been here as long, if not longer, than we have. Why didn't you make your presence known to us?"

"That has been the subject of much debate between us," the Romulan replied. "We knew you to be settlers, not official Federation representatives. There were four of us and many of you. We did not

believe our chances of survival to be good if we offered ourselves for surrender. We apologise for the things we have stolen. We took only that which was necessary for our survival."

Susan didn't quite know what to say. She was stunned both by the confessions, and the fact that the Romulans thought themselves to be in danger from her people.

Kirk, however, was not quite so tongue-tied. "I have had the experience of meeting quite a few Romulans, but I find the concept of peace-loving refugees a hard one to grasp. Why should I believe you?"

"Tell me, Captain Kirk," Jamal replied, "are all the people on your planet in complete agreement about your membership of the UFP? Or is there perhaps a small minority who are opposed to it, who would resist contact with aliens? Perhaps there are even some who are prejudiced against all non-Terrans. Are there not some Humans who advocate war with us, or with the Klingons, who are not so peace-loving as the majority of your people seem to be?"

Kirk hesitated. There were always differences of opinion in politics, and although he knew of a tiny element of lunatic fringe organisations like the 'Humans Only' movement, he did not personally know anyone who subscribed to their beliefs. Nevertheless, he could not deny their existence, even if their following was extremely small. Freedom of speech had its price.

"A few, perhaps," he answered, "but -"

T'Lea cut him off. "Do you then find it so hard to believe that there exist in the Romulan Empire people who think our government is wrong? People who

are sick of the treachery and deceit? There are those of us who would see peace between your people and mine. More than you might think."

Kirk was moved by her speech, and moreover found himself being swayed by the logic of the argument. They certainly looked as though their story was true, judging by their appearance, but the ultimate decision would rest with the Diplomatic Corps and not with him; however, since he was the only Federation representative here the interim decision was his. Looking them squarely in the eyes he scrutinised them once more, but his instinct was to believe them, and he knew he would grant their request for sanctuary.

"We'd better get started," he said evenly. "It's a long way back to the town, and there's not much daylight left."

He didn't exactly expect them to start jumping up and down with joy, but they definitely seemed less than relieved at his decision. "Is there a problem?" he asked tiredly, noting their reactions - or rather, lack of them.

"You haven't quite heard all the facts yet," T'Lea responded nervously. "You see, when we rigged the scout ship to self-destruct, we didn't have time to bring all the Danokene down with us. The rest of it was blown up in the outer atmosphere along with the ship, and some of it, regrettably, entered the atmosphere of this planet, and subsequently the food chain."

She stopped talking and glanced anxiously at the two Humans, trying to gauge their reactions to her latest revelation.

"Danokene, here on Cloros! Then *that's* what's wrong with my people, why they've been dying!" Susan blurted out,

shocked to her core. Tears welled up in her eyes as she digested the information, staring accusingly at the small group, all of whom gazed sullenly at the ground.

The Captain's mind was quick to grasp the implications of what he had just heard. "Do you have any of the original compound here with you on the planet?"

"Yes, in the cave, but as I already told you, Captain, Danokene is a failure," T'Lea replied.

"I have a certain Vulcan Science Officer who is very eager to analyse this compound in its original state," Kirk said. "With this sample he should be able to come up with a solution to the problem; maybe something to neutralise its effects."

"Is it possible?" Susan asked hopefully.

"Well we won't know standing here," Kirk replied. "Let's get back to the Copernicus and find out."

T'Lea hurried back into the cave, followed by Jamal and the other Romulans. It did not take very long to collect the sample and their other belongings, and very soon the group got under way, all eager - for different reasons - to reach the shuttlecraft.

Three pairs of worried eyes gazed anxiously at Spock. As commanding officer any decisions taken about Dr McCoy would be his responsibility. The Vulcan dealt with this problem as he did with most things: logically. He turned to Nurse Elliot.

"The diagnostic scanners have confirmed that Dr McCoy does indeed have acute appendicitis. It is imperative

that he be operated on immediately. Dr M'Benga will not be able to return to the Enterprise in time, therefore you must perform the operation."

All colour drained completely from the young Ensign's face as the full implications of Spock's statement hit her. She looked in horror from Spock to Uhura to Scott.

"I... I can't," she stammered. "I'm not qualified to do this. I don't even know how."

"We have a full communications link with Dr M'Benga. He will guide you through the procedure step by step. If you do not try, Nurse Elliot, then Dr McCoy will certainly die," the Vulcan replied gently. "If you operate, then there is a chance that he will live. Can you deny him that chance?"

"Ye've got tae do it, lass. There's nobody else who can," pleaded Mr Scott.

Nurse Elliot glanced nervously at the ground, then gradually her expression changed to one of resignation. Taking a deep breath she lifted her head and walked purposefully towards the operating table.

"Lt Uhura," she said timidly, "I'll need someone to assist; I'd be grateful if it was you."

It was the Communications Officer's turn to look shocked, but covering her surprise she nodded her head in reluctant agreement.

"Dr M'Benga, please respond," the Vulcan said.

"Lorraine, are you there?" came the instantaneous reply in the Doctor's deep baritone voice.

Nurse Elliot nodded her head, then realising that it was an audio link only croaked out a "Yes."

"Has Dr McCoy been anaesthetised?"

"No, but he's already unconscious."

"Give him 10 ccs of proxalyn. That should make sure he stays that way for the duration."

Nurse Elliot picked up the hypodermic and adjusted the settings to correspond with the instructions. She pressed it against McCoy's upper arm and slowly depressed the lever. The drug entered his body with a soft hiss. McCoy stopped moaning almost instantly and relaxed visibly as the proxalyn started to take effect.

"Done," she replied.

"What you need to do now," said M'Benga, "is to make an incision about five inches long in his lower right abdomen. The cut should be about three inches to the right of his navel and should start just above the right hip bone, about half an inch to the left."

Having quickly washed up and laid out the instruments required, Elliot finished bathing the area with antiseptic and glanced up at Uhura. She was amazed at how much empathy and encouragement could be transmitted only with the eyes; words seemed somehow unnecessary as the two women shared a moment only they could understand.

Uhura picked up the scalpel in her gloved hand and gave it to Elliot.

Transferring the scalpel to her right hand, the nurse let it hover in the air only millimetres from McCoy's exposed skin. The perspiration which had already

broken out began to trickle down the side of her face. Uhura hastily wiped it away and Elliot turned her attention once again to her patient. She hesitated, loath to make the actual incision, knowing she alone held his life in the balance. It would be the challenge of her life.

Decision made, she took a deep breath to stop her hand shaking, swallowed hard, and promptly fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Uhura, Spock and Scott could only stare in disbelief at this latest twist of fate. Uhura let out a strangled gasp and her hand flew to her mouth. Scott reacted slightly quicker. He picked up the unconscious woman and placed her gently on an empty bed. Having satisfied himself that she was still breathing, and not knowing what else to do, he turned once again to Spock.

The Vulcan calmly bent down and picked up the scalpel from the floor. He placed it in the disposal chute, walked over to the small cabinet, and selected another one. He returned once again to the prone form of the Doctor and turned to the intercom panel at his side, addressing Dr M'Benga directly.

"It would appear there has been a change of plan," he said. "I will perform the operation on Dr McCoy."

Scott drowned out any reply M'Benga might have made. "Have ye gone crazy, Mr Spock? Ye canna be seriously thinking about doing the operation yerself!"

Spock raised an eyebrow. "I assure you, Mr Scott, that as Science Officer I do have some knowledge of HUMAN anatomy, and unless your knowledge of that subject is greater than mine, then I believe I am the logical choice."

"Sickbay. Come in, Sickbay," a worried-sounding M'Benga shouted through the intercom link. "Are you still receiving me?"

"We are, Doctor," the Vulcan replied, "and unless Mr Scott has any further objections, I will begin the surgery."

Scott looked at Spock, and then at Uhura, but realising the truth of the situation shook his head. there was nothing he could do but stand by and watch helplessly as his shipmates fought to save McCoy's life.

Kirk and the rest of the unlikely group finally had the remaining shuttlecraft in their sights. Night had fallen over the planet, but the twin moons of Saura and Selos glowed brightly in the evening sky, providing ample light to guide their way. Lamps shone softly in most of the windows that they passed. Cloros IV was not exactly known for its night life, and most of the colonists were snug in their various homes, already settled for the night. The small procession through the streets had gone virtually unnoticed.

It had been slow going, and frequent rest stops had been required for the Romulans in their weakened state. In the manner of their people they had denied the necessity of the delays, but Kirk could see the gratitude in T'Lea's eyes as she worried over the health of her companions.

Susan had surprised him the most. After getting over her initial shock and anger she had spent most of the journey back to camp in the company of the Romulan woman. T'Lea spoke excellent Standard, so communication was not a problem, and they seemed to find much

to talk about.

Unfortunately, this left Kirk all the more time to brood about McCoy. His thoughts had been constantly with the Doctor throughout the journey, and not knowing what had happened had been the hardest to bear. Several times he had reached for his communicator, but he knew that as soon as there was any definite news he would be informed. There were times when he was called upon to show the trust he placed in his crew, and this was one of those times, but it didn't make the waiting any easier.

When the communicator did finally beep, he almost dropped it in surprise. "Kirk here," was his anxious response.

Uhura's soothing tones could be heard on the other end. "I have an update on Dr McCoy's condition," she said pleasantly. "He has successfully made it through the operation, and although he is still unconscious, Mr Spock confirms that his vital signs are stable and he should be coming round soon."

Kirk hadn't even realised he'd been holding his breath until he exhaled loudly. Relief washed over him as he heard the good news.

"Thanks, Uhura, that's wonderful," he replied. "Tell Mr Scott to expect the Copernicus within the hour, and... uh... he'd better have a Security team standing by in the landing bay."

"Mr Scott here, Captain," the Scotsman cut in from the Bridge. "I've just given the all-clear for the transporters to be used only a couple of minutes ago. Ye dinna have to use the shuttle unless ye particularly want to."

"In that case, belay that last order, Scotty, but have that Security team stand by in the transporter room instead.

Await my command. Kirk out."

He flipped the communicator shut and stuck it back in his belt. A hand touched his arm, and he whirled around in surprise, automatically taking up a defensive position.

"Jim, it's me," Susan said, her eyes smiling with amusement at his reaction. "I just wanted to say how pleased I am that Dr McCoy is going to be all right."

Kirk relaxed, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Thank you, Susan. I'm sorry - it's just that the last few hours have been a bit tense, to say the least. I appreciate your concern."

Susan nodded, then sobered. "I have to go now. I must contact the Council of Elders and arrange a special meeting to let them know about what has happened."

"I understand," he replied, "and I need to get back to my ship."

Susan didn't look up immediately. "Do you think that when things have calmed down a little that maybe we could get together for some dinner before you leave?" It had taken a lot for her to ask him, and she fidgeted nervously with her hands as she waited for his reply.

"There's no perhaps about it," Kirk grinned. "I'd be delighted. As soon as we have any progress with the Danokene I'll contact you and let you know. We can make arrangements then."

The Romulans stood silently to one side, doing their best not to intrude in the obviously private conversation between the two Humans. They were all occupied with their own private thoughts, wondering if they were safe at last, their ordeal finally over, or if it was just beginning and they would be sent back to

the Romulan Empire, returned to their persecutors.

"Thank you for everything, Jim," the Governor said, finally finding herself able to meet his eyes. Their gazes locked for a few seconds before she reluctantly turned away and went to contact the Council.

Kirk flipped open his communicator, but continued to watch her as she receded into the distance. He had to remind himself that this was not the time to become distracted from the business at hand.

"Kirk here, Mr Scott," he said at last. "Five to beam up."

"Five, sir?" came the puzzled reply.

"Yes, Scotty, five. Energise when ready."

Their forms began to shimmer and fade as they were caught up in the effects of the transporter. The view of the Copernicus and surrounding camp was soon replaced by the Enterprise transporter room. As ordered, Scott was standing by with the security team, who soon snapped to attention as the identity of the unexpected guests became apparent. Phasers were aimed at the bedraggled-looking group.

"I don't believe you'll find those necessary, gentlemen. Our guests are unarmed, and their only immediate concerns are a hot bath and some decent food. A bit like myself," Kirk grinned wryly, stepping off the transporter platform towards the Engineer. He addressed Chekov, who had put himself in charge of the Security team. "If you could show our visitors to the guest quarters, please, Ensign, I'll be in Sickbay checking on Dr McCoy."

"Guest quarters, Keptin?" an

amazed Chekov replied. "Surely you mean the Brig?"

"If I'd meant the Brig I'd have said the Brig, Mr Chekov," Kirk replied, slightly annoyed at having his orders questioned. "Guest quarters will do, but leave a guard outside as a precautionary measure."

"Aye, sir," Chekov replied with a sigh, and gestured to the Romulans that they should follow him.

Accompanied by the rest of the Security team, the group made its way along the corridor to the guest quarters on level 5; Kirk and Scott walked in the opposite direction towards the turbolift that would take them to Sickbay.

"Ah don't suppose ye'll be wantin' to explain just how ye managed tae find four o' the sorriest-looking specimens of the Romulan species ah've ever seen?" asked Scott as they waited for the lift to arrive.

Kirk smile in spite of his fatigue. "Later, Scotty, but first I need to see Spock, and I want to see how Dr McCoy is. I'll update you when I get the chance."

"Now that's something Ah'll look forward tae hearing," the Scotsman replied as they entered the lift.

Seconds later they arrived at their destination, exited the lift and walked into Sickbay. McCoy was lying on the bed nearest the door, still unconscious. Uhura was sitting beside him, holding his hand. She smiled warmly at the sight of the Captain. Spock looked up from the computer terminal and nodded his head in greeting, then walked over to the small group not clustered around the bed.

Possibly it was the sound of voices, or the fact that the anaesthetic had worn

off, but for whatever reason his eyes began to flutter and a moan escaped his lips. McCoy didn't want to wake up. If he went back to sleep, he reasoned, then the pain would go away. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to will himself back into unconsciousness. Uhura's voice, calling his name over and over again, distracted his concentration and reluctantly he opened his eyes fully. He was greeted by the sight of four very concerned faces staring worriedly down at him. At least, three of the faces looked worried, he corrected himself. Spock's expression was as unfathomable as ever. He tried to get up, but Uhura gently pushed him back down again.

"You need to rest," she said, smiling. "Don't move too much or you'll open the wound up again."

"Wound?" McCoy asked. He still felt confused and groggy from the effects of the anaesthetic. He shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts and piece together what had happened.

"I knew it!" he groaned. "That pointy-eared Vulcan finally made a mistake and crashed the blasted shuttlecraft."

Uhura giggled, Kirk and Scott grinned, while Spock managed to look faintly surprised and offended at the same time.

"I assure you, Doctor, I did no such thing. The shuttlecraft is in eminently better shape than you are at this time. You are recovering from an emergency appendectomy."

The pieces started falling back into place. He remembered the pain in his side, the trip back to the Enterprise, and then nothing. But it all fitted, and he knew that Spock was right. Gingerly he lifted the blanket and looked down at the

wound. This time the room didn't spin, and he could see clearly where the incision had been made. He was pleased to note that it seemed to be clean and healing well. In a day or two he would be able to cover it with synthetic skin and there would be no trace of it at all.

"A fine job," he said with satisfaction. "Where's M'Benga? I want to compliment him on his handiwork."

"He should be beaming up from Cloros IV any time now," Uhura replied. "He's anxious to check on you himself and see how you are."

McCoy looked shocked. "You mean to tell me that M'Benga's still on Cloros IV? Then that must mean that Nurse Elliot performed the operation," he said with amazement.

"The operation was carried out under Dr M'Benga's instructions via the com-link," Uhura replied truthfully but hesitantly.

"Then where the blazes is Nurse Elliot?" McCoy asked with exasperation.

Uhura pointed to the bed on his left. Kirk and Scott moved aside to clear the view. Nurse Elliot could be seen, still unconscious, sleeping peacefully. A slight snore could be heard from the young woman.

"Nurse Elliot fainted just as she was about to perform the operation," Uhura explained nervously. "She wasn't the one who carried out the surgery."

McCoy was silent for a few seconds as he digested this latest piece of information. "If it wasn't M'Benga and it wasn't Nurse Elliot, then *WHO DID?*" he almost shouted.

"I am responsible, Doctor," replied

Spock.

If McCoy was shocked before, this time he was absolutely incredulous. Kirk didn't appear to be lagging too far behind. Both stared at the Vulcan in disbelief. Only Uhura and Scott, who had been there throughout, were not disconcerted by the revelation.

"YOU?" McCoy croaked. "YOU carried out the operation on me?"

"There was no choice in the matter," Spock replied. "Dr M'Benga could not have reached here in time from Cloros, and Nurse Elliot fainted as she was about to make the incision. The diagnostic scanners showed your appendix was beginning to rupture. Without an immediate operation you would have died."

"Mr Spock was... the logical choice," Uhura couldn't resist adding, hiding her amusement at the stunned expressions.

"I'll have you court-martialled for this!" McCoy exploded. "Practicing medicine without a licence, impersonating a Doctor, endangering the life of a patient... Why, you... you charlatan! They should clap you in irons and throw away the key for this, at the very least!" He lay back on the bed, closed his eyes, then turned to Kirk. "You heard him, Jim. DO something!"

"Take it easy, Bones," Kirk replied, smiling himself now. "That's no way to talk to a man who just saved your life. Spock acted correctly under the circumstances, and you should be grateful that he did."

McCoy chewed his lower lip in contemplation, trying to decide what to do next. Shock finally gave way to common sense as he realised the Captain was right.

"Uhura, would you please bring me over a mirror?" he asked a little more calmly.

"Of course; but what do you want with it, Dr McCoy?" she asked, heading towards the object in question.

"I want to see what else that Vulcan removed besides my appendix," the Doctor replied gruffly, "and I can't sit up yet to have a look and see for myself."

Spock didn't bother to reply, but the other three exploded with laughter. Scott had to concentrate just to stay on his chair, and Kirk found himself wiping a tear from his eye. Uhura could only stay where she was, clutching her sides and trying to get her breath back from laughing too hard.

"Glad to see you're feeling better, Bones," Kirk said when he had gained control of himself again.

"Hmmpf," grunted McCoy sheepishly, "and uh... thanks, Spock."

"Thanks are not necessary, Dr McCoy," the Vulcan replied. "I was merely doing my duty. In fact, I found the whole experience most... fascinating."

Kirk gestured for Spock to follow him, having decided by unspoken consent to leave the Doctor to his much-needed rest and the good care of Uhura. Mr Scott accompanied them to the Bridge. On the way there Kirk filled them in about the Danokene and the Romulans. He produced the sample he had been given by TLea and handed it to Spock, who elected to remain on the turbolift when it reached their destination.

"I shall be in the laboratory analysing this sample if you wish to contact me, Captain," the Vulcan said as Kirk and Scott entered the Bridge.

The Captain nodded his consent as the turbolift doors closed behind them.

"Let me know as soon as Dr M'Benga is aboard," he said, addressing Uhura's replacement at Communications. "I have some very good news for him."

Feeling very much refreshed after a long soak in the bath and a good night's sleep in his own bed, Kirk beamed back down to Cloros the following morning. Spock went with him, carrying a large crate in his arms.

Having already been contacted, Governor Jorgensen was already there to meet them as they arrived just outside the hospital.

"Welcome again, gentlemen," she said pleasantly as they were released from the effects of the transporter beam.

Spock placed the crate very gently on the ground.

"Vials of the vitamin B complex," Kirk said, indicating the crate. "Enough to last your people for nearly a year. By that time the effects of the Danokene should be neutralised by Mr Spock's antidote, which we can disperse from the Enterprise into the outer atmosphere of your planet."

She came forward and grasped both of his hands in hers. "How can I ever thank you for what you and your crew have done for my people?"

"If you will excuse me, Captain, I will take this into the hospital immediately," Spock interrupted, picking up the crate and heading towards the double wooden doors at the entrance of the building.

"You know, it's ironic," Susan continued. "All that time spent looking for some kind of foreign substance in our bodies, something that shouldn't be there, and it turns out to be something that was missing that caused so many people to get sick and die."

"Yes, Beriberi," replied Kirk. "With synthesised food proteins and supplements, it's been virtually eradicated on earth for centuries."

"And we only got sick when our supplies ran out and we started eating the food we had grown ourselves here on Cloros," Susan said, shaking her head sadly.

"It's over now, Susan," Kirk replied forcefully. "What time would you like to eat dinner tonight?"

Two days later the last of the colonists had been rounded up and given their shots. There was no more reason for the Enterprise to stay. Kirk sat in his command chair on the Bridge and read his new orders from Starfleet.

No decision had yet been made regarding the Romulans and their request for asylum. The Enterprise was to head back to Starbase 7, where they could be interrogated at length, and Kirk could give the full details to a Board of Enquiry. He would almost have preferred to have been ordered back to the Neutral Zone than spend god knew how long telling the same story over and over again to a room full of diplomats.

Kirk sighed and prepared to give the order to leave. Spock had taken his customary place at the Captain's side when the doors whooshed open and McCoy entered the Bridge. He walked right past the two senior officers and

straight to the vacant Science station. He glanced down at the vast array of buttons and dials.

in Sickbay, I'd replace him on the Bridge. Now, I wonder what this button does?" he asked no-one in particular.

"Bones?" asked Kirk with more than a trace of curiosity in his voice at the Doctor's actions.

The answer was soon clearly obvious as the power went down all over the ship and the Bridge was plunged into temporary darkness until the emergency lighting kicked in; which was just as well, since no-one could see the worried frown on Kirk's face.



A MOTHER'S THOUGHTS

For years I have watched you, my son.
Under Vulcan's hot sun you played your solemn games as a child.
But as you grew up I found you with your eyes turned to the skies
whenever something troubled you.
Then already I knew that one day
The stars would take my only son away from me.

You matured, and you decided to go your own way...
Your path led away from us, and your father tore the bridge down
that might have brought you back.
For eighteen years, my son, we have not heard from you
apart from the reports you send to the Academy of Sciences.
Your father reads them with a scientist's envy...

I watch you again, my son,
and indeed you have grown up and made your way
in more respects than one.
Admired by the crew, loved by your friends
you have outgrown Vulcan's lonely deserts -
and somehow gained your father's grudgingly given approval.

I look at the stars surrounding this silver vessel
and at the golden man in command.
His lion eyes hold a special smile for you
and you understand each other on a level too deep for words.
Indeed, I can see now that I was wrong.
Living among Humans my son has finally learned to smile...

Bettina Rackel



